

THE TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW TERM *NĪR*: ‘DAVID’S YOKE’?¹

Deuk-il Shin
(dishin@kosin.ac.kr)

Summary

The purpose of this article is to query the viability of Douglas K. Stuart’s recent suggestion that the Hebrew form nīr ‘lamp’ should be translated as etymologically related to the Akkadian nīru ‘yoke, domination’ on the basis of Paul D. Hanson’s statement. The study is particularly interested in the phrase ‘lamp of David’. The author insists that the traditional interpretation of the Hebrew nīr as ‘lamp’ be maintained, thus rejecting the relevance of the Akkadian niru ‘yoke’.

1. Introduction

Douglas Stuart contributed an article recently in which he argued that the phrase ‘David’s lamp’ should be translated as ‘David’s yoke’ (dominion) in the English Bible (1 Kgs 11:36; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). His statement is simply to support Paul Hanson’s assertion that the Hebrew term *nīr* means ‘yoke’ on the basis of an Akkadian cognate *nīru*.² Stuart regards ‘David’s lamp’ as one of the mistranslations ‘that point a reader in a wrong direction, and that can throw off a preacher or teacher and his or her audience’.³ Indicating that the wrong translation ‘lamp’ has not been corrected to ‘yoke’ in dozens of later versions, commentaries, and lexicons, Stuart appears to

¹ The first draft of this article was published in Korean (*Bible & Theology* 72 [2014], 33-56) and this elaborated paper was read at Tyndale Fellowship Study Conference 2015.

² Paul D. Hanson, ‘The Song of Heshbon and David’s Nir’, *HTR* 61 (1968), 297-320.

³ Douglas K. Stuart, ‘David’s “lamp” (1 Kings 11:36) and “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12)’, *BSac* 171, no. 681 (2014), 9.

attribute the neglect of Hanson's contribution to translators' preference for comfort and for the convenience of tradition.⁴

Hanson's opinion has been accepted by several scholars. Buis translated the Hebrew term נִיר (*nīr*) as 'power' (un pouvoir) by understanding it as 'yoke' in his French commentary.⁵ McKenzie rendered it as 'domain' with the footnote, 'The usual translation of this word as "lamp" (NRSV) does not make much sense. The translation here reflects the alternative meaning "fiefdom" suggested by Paul D. Hanson.'⁶ Recently, Klein translated the Hebrew word as 'dominion' in his commentary.⁷ A lexicon that reflects Hanson's suggestions is *DCH* in which the term *נִיר is introduced with the meaning of 'yoke'.⁸ Kellermann, who contributed to *ThWAT*, included the Hebrew word נִיר in the section of נֶר (*nēr*) in which he just introduced Hanson's contention.⁹ Some scholars provide information about Hanson's thesis in their writings but still oppose it. Wiseman states, without giving the reason, that 'there is no need to equate this with "dominion" (Akkad. *nīr*, 'yoke')'.¹⁰ Assuming that the Hebrew word נִיר is a variation of the Hebrew term *nēr*, Cogan rejects the word 'yoke' giving examples of variations of orthography (*nr*, *nyr*) in Ugaritic.¹¹

Even in English versions published after Hanson's article, the translation of the Hebrew word נִיר as 'lamp' is the most common (eg REB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, ESV). In the case of GNB, the phrase is rendered as 'descendant(s)' in three texts, (1 Kgs 11:36; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7) but it is read as 'a son to rule' in one text (1 Kgs 15:4). It is hard to judge whether the last one is influenced by Hanson or if it simply shows a free translation.

⁴ Stuart, 'David's "lamp"', 9-10.

⁵ P. Buis, *Le livre des rois* (Paris: Gabalda, 1997), 107-108.

⁶ S. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 67.

⁷ R. Klein, *2 Chronicles*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 304.

⁸ D. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 5:683.

⁹ D. Kellermann, 'נִיר', *ThWAT* 624-25. Two Hebrew lexicons were published in German in 2013 but they did not reflect Hanson's opinion: W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch*, 18th ed. (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2013), 815; W. Dietrich, et al., *Konkise und Aktualisierte Ausgabe des Hebräischen und Aramäischen Lexikons zum Alten Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 352.

¹⁰ D. J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 149.

¹¹ M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 95.

The goal of this article is to examine whether 'yoke' is a proper translation for the Hebrew word **נִיר** on the basis of an examination of comparative Semitic languages and biblical uses including some ancient versions. The study will be limited to the phrases in historical books.

2. Hanson's Assertion for the Hebrew Word **נִיר** (*Nîr*)

Hanson first considers *nîrām* in Numbers 21:30 as a nominal form rather than as a verbal form, *yārā* (to strike) with suffix (3m.pl.), by paying attention to the translation of the Targum, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate. He thinks that the translators of the Targum Onkelos capture the original etymology of the word (*malqū*), and Jerome offers the literal translation *jugum ipsorum* (their yoke) as the correct etymology of *nîr*, which is the metaphorical meaning of 'dominion.'¹²

Hanson applied the meaning of the 'yoke' to the translation of the phrase 'David's lamp'. He pointed out that the Hebrew word **נִיר** has a long i-vowel (*mater lectionis*), which would be derived from the common Semitic word (*nîr* > *nîr*), while the Hebrew noun **נִיר** is the stative participle of a medial *waw* root (*nāwîr* > *nîr* > *nēr*).¹³ He thinks that, in the case of Akkadian, a clear distinction between two roots, *nawirum* and *nîrum* in Old Akkadian is maintained throughout the later developments of the Akkadian dialects. Furthermore, he compared the cognate languages to prove a distinction between the Hebrew term **נִיר** and common Semitic word *nîr*: in Old Akkadian (*nawirum* 'shining', *nûrum* 'light' / *nîrum* 'yoke'); in the Amarna Tablets (*namāru* 'to be shining' / *nîru* 'yoke'); in Syriac (*nwr* Pael, 'to kindle', *nūrā* 'fire' / *nîrā* 'yoke'); in Aramaic (*n^ehar* 'to shine', *nūr* 'fire' / *nîr* 'yoke'); in Arabic (*nūr* 'lamp' / *nîr* 'yoke').¹⁴ Thus, his opinion is that the two Hebrew words **נִיר** and **נִיר** are not interchangeable, because the Hebrew **נִיר** was derived from the Akkadian term *nîru* later and the

¹² Hanson, 'David's Nir', 304.

¹³ 'However, even if one agrees to derive some of these forms from biradical roots with a long (or, according to others, a short) vowel separating the two radical consonants, the problems connected with the historical derivation of this verbal class are not yet solved.' Joshua Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew: An Introduction* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 252.

¹⁴ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 311.

latter is used hundreds of times as a metaphor of a king's dominion over his subject in the Assyrian Annals.¹⁵

Hanson classified the use of the Akkadian term into three meanings by introducing a variety of examples of the word *nīru*, employed as the meaning of 'political dominion': (1) '*nīru* can be used to designate either the dominion of the king over a conquered people or his sovereignty over his own subjects'; (2) 'the yoke can represent either the suzerain's harsh subjugation of an intractable vassal or his benign rule over his obedient subjects'; (3) 'yoke is a metaphor at home within the context of covenant relations between sovereign and vassal'.¹⁶ In particular, Hanson seems to highlight the use of the word for a covenant relation between Yahweh and David in his statement that: 'The Deuteronomist adopted this old Northern tradition into his history to explain how it was that despite the repeated unfaithfulness of the Davidide kings, Yahweh did not remove them from their dominion over Judah.'¹⁷ As a result, he contends that 'yoke' as a translation for the Hebrew word *nīr* is superior to 'lamp' in the four texts under consideration (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7).

3. Problems of Hanson's Translation for the Hebrew Term *nīr*

3.1 The use of the Akkadian term *nīru* in the Letters of Tel El Amarna

As Hanson proposed, the meaning of the Akkadian term *nīru* clearly means 'yoke'. However, we need to examine how the word was used in the land of Canaan as early as the fourteenth century BC. The Akkadian term *nīru* occurs two times in the letters of Amarna but the word *ḥullu* means 'yoke' too. The texts containing the words *nīru* and *ḥullu* are as follows:

I[*I n*]i-i-ru [*ša*] narkabti (*nīrū ša narkabti*, yokes [of] chariot)¹⁸
[*ša*]-ak-na-te (*šaknate*, It was [p]laced)

¹⁵ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 312.

¹⁶ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 312-13.

¹⁷ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 315.

¹⁸ J. A. Knudtzon, et al., *Die el-Amarna-Tafeln, mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen [=EAT]* (Aalen: Zeller, 1964), 22.1.1.4.39.

[ki]ša-di-ia (*kišādīya*, my [n]eck)

i-na ḥu-li (*ina ḥulli*, in yoke)

ša ú-ú-ba-lu (*ša ubbalu*, I bear)

(My neck was placed in the yoke which I would bear.)¹⁹

[š]a-[ak]-n[a-t]i p[a-n]a (*šaknati pāna* (?), the fr[ont si]de (?) is placed)

^{isu} ni-ri / ḥu-ul-lu šarri bēli-ia a-na (*nîri / hullu šarri bēliya ana*, of the yoke (yoke) of the king, my lord, on)

^{[š]iru} k[š]ādi-ia ú ub-ba-lu-šu (*kišādīya u ubbalušu*, my n[ec]k, and I carry it.)

(The front side (?) of the yoke (yoke) of the king, my lord, is placed for my neck, and I carry it.)²²

It is observed that both Akkadian terms, *nîru* and *ḥullu*, mean 'yoke' in these three texts. The term *nîru*, which was individually employed, served to represent the concrete meaning of 'yoke', while *ḥullu* was used to express a metaphor of dominion because in the last two cases, the word is applied to the king's neck as though he was a yoked animal. The third text shows that the two different words are juxtaposed with the same meaning in one sentence. The term *nîri* has the form of a status constructus genitive, which means 'of the yoke of' (the king), while the term *ḥullu* had nominative form. This juxtaposition seems to clarify the meaning of the first word. This third letter was sent by *Ia(h)tiri*, the feudal lord in South Palestine, to Akhenaten, the Egyptian Pharaoh. The word *ḥullu* was added to *nîru* so that even a Canaanite might understand the meaning of the word *nîru* because *ḥullu* has a Canaanite origin.²³ In other words, the Canaanite word was written in Akkadian, while Akkadian *ḥullu* has a different meaning: ring (as ornament).²⁴ It is observed that the individually used term *nîru* did not serve to express the metaphor of dominion in the letters of Amarna. It means that the third text could possibly imply that the term *nîru* had not yet become generalized to signify 'dominion' by the fourteenth century BC when the Amarna letter was written in the land of Canaan. The usage of the word *nîru* as an expression of rule or

¹⁹ EAT 257.13-16. It is not proper that Knudtzon translated the first verb as 'Ich habe gelegt' because this is a stative verb (f. 3. sg.) whose subject should be 'neck' (*kišādu*).

²² EAT 296.37-39.

²³ EAT I, 1546. The addition of *ḥullu* is not for a variation or emphasis but for clarification. Hanson also regards it as clarification of the meaning of 'yoke'. Hanson, 'David's Nir', 313.

²⁴ CAD, 6 H:229-30.

dominion in the Amarna letter appears to be unfamiliar to the Canaanite, though our materials are limited. Thus, it is possible that the scribe added the Canaanite *ḥullu* to *nīru* not for the sake of the Egyptian king but for the Canaanite monarch to understand the meaning of the Akkadian term *nīru*. That is to say, the metaphorical meaning of the Akkadian term *nīru* might not have been well known to a Canaanite at that time.

3.2 The Akkadian Term *nīru* Which Means ‘Light.’

Hanson mentioned that the Hebrew word *nīr* is entirely different from the Akkadian term *nīru* (light), and the status of the word *nīru* was maintained in the later developments of Akkadian dialects. As a result, he asserted that the Hebrew word *nīr*, which lost this meaning, should be translated as ‘yoke’ on the basis of the common Semitic phenomenon such as the Akkadian term *nīru*.

However, there is evidence that the Akkadian term *nīru* too means ‘light’. An Akkadian homonym *nīru* signifies ‘light’ rather than ‘yoke’ in a tablet seemingly inscribed in Middle Akkadian.²⁵ The word *nīru* is a contracted form from the verb *nawāru* (to shine): **nawaru* > *nawru* > *nīru*.²⁶ The document containing the word is classified as an incipit of a hymn, which appears to be used in an Akkadian cult. It includes the sentence, *rāmī nīru mušnammiru attalī*, which means ‘My love is a light brightening (even) the eclipse.’²⁷ The word *nīru* is a complement and simultaneously a subject of the participle. In this sentence, *nīru* has nothing to do with the meaning yoke, even though this *nīru* (light) has precisely the same cuneiform (ni-i-ru) as *nīru* (yoke).²⁸ Its verb *mušnammiru* has the form of a ŠD-stem (causative-factitive), a participle of *namāru*, which is the later form of the Old Akkadian verb *nawārum*.²⁹ So, this sentence was written as a hendiadys.

²⁵ E. Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts I* [=KAR] (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1919), 158 vii 45.

²⁶ In Hebrew vowel contraction, *a + w = ō* but in Akkadian, *a + w = ī*. J. P. Lettinga, *Grammatica van het Bijbels Hebreeuws* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), § 12.1.)

²⁷ KAR 158 vii 45.

²⁸ O. Schroeder, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur verschiedenen Inhalts* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1920), 218 A ii 30.

²⁹ The ŠD stem is quite rare, found mainly in poetry. R. I. Caplice, *Introduction to Akkadian* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1980), § 58.

In addition, the Akkadian term *nīru*, which seems to mean 'light', is found in many personal names: Ištar-*nīru* (Ishtar is a light),³⁰ Nīr-Tašmētu (the light of Tashmetu), and Niruabi (The light is of Father).³¹ Besides, Mari documents show many Amorite personal names written in Akkadian, which appear to have the same meaning of the word *nīru*; Be-li-ni-ri (of the lord of light); Dagan-ni-ri (Dagan is of light), An-n[u]-ni-ri (Anu of a light), etc.³²

It can be said that this kind of variation of the Akkadian *nīru* displays the morphological flexibility of Semitic languages. The meaning of this variation may have to be considered, if the Hebrew word *nīr* was derived from the Akkadian *nīru*. In other words, the Hebrew word *nīr* may represent the meaning of 'light', even if the Hebrew word is closely connected with that of Akkadian.

3.3 The Hebrew word נִיר (*nīr*)

Although Hanson tried to derive the meaning of the Hebrew *nīr* from Akkadian, it is not impossible to trace the morphology of the word in Hebrew. First, we can think about the nominalised word, *nīr*. Sometimes, a waw in an ayin/waw verb is transformed into 'yod' (י) when it becomes a nominalised infinitive: e.g. *dīn* (< *dūn*, judgement), *qīmā* (< *qūm*, standing), *šīhā* (< *šūh*, hole).³³ Thus, it may be possible, though it is rare, that the Hebrew *nīr* could have been transformed from the verb *nwr*. The noun, *m^enōrā* < *nwr* is connected with the term *nyr*.³⁴ Second, the Hebrew term *nīr* is probably a variation of the word *nēr* (light/lamp). It is conceivable that נֵר (*nēr*), in *scriptio defectiva*, might appear as נִיר (*nīr* or *nēr*) in *scriptio plene*. Even in the Ugaritic language, the word *nr* that means 'light' has a variation *nyr*, even though 'y' is not *mater lectionis* in Ugaritic.³⁵ There are variations on

³⁰ Soden understood *nīru* in Ištar-*nīru* as ruler's yoke. W. Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 794.

³¹ *CAD*, N II:265.

³² H. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts: A Structural and Lexical Study* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 97, 243.

³³ H. Bauer, *Historische Grammatik der Hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testamentes*, Erster Band: *Einleitung, Schriftlehre, Laut- und Formenlehre* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), § 61 q.

³⁴ *BDB* 633.

³⁵ P. Bordreuil, & D. Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 61, 337; 'yrh *nyr šmm*' (Yariḥ! Illuminator of Heaven). 'This word is formed like hebrew טַיִר <tailor> from rt. חוּט etc.' W. Herrmann, *Yarih und Nikkal und der*

the phrase, e.g., נִירִי (*nêrî*, my light/lamp), which should not be translated as ‘my yoke’ but as ‘my light/lamp’: ‘You are my light/lamp, O, Yahweh, you will brighten my darkness’ (2 Sam. 22:29). In this case, the form of נִירִי is composed of a combination of נִיר vocalized with *mater lectionis* and suffix *î* (1c.sg.). It might be read differently from the word נִיר because Masoretic scholars vocalized it with the vowel *ē* rather than with the vowel *ī*. However, there is no problem in understanding נִיר as נִיר. In the same vein, they should have vocalized נִיר with the vowel *ē* instead of the vowel *ī* for readers to read the word smoothly and for consistency of occurrences in historical texts (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). Maybe the Masoretic scholars wrongly vocalized the word by being confused with Aramaic נִיר.

The Hebrew noun *nîr*, as a homonym, has two lexical meanings in the Old Testament: ‘light/lamp’ and ‘prepared virgin soil’.³⁶ The former is related to David’s dynasty, the latter is associated with agriculture, which sometimes has a metaphor for restoration (Jer. 4:3; Hos. 10:12; Prov. 13:23). However, these two different meanings originated from one root. König regards the noun *nîr* as ‘newly broken ground’ based on the root *nwr*, in the sense of ‘bringing the soil under layers to daylight, thus making newly broken land’.³⁷ At any rate, this word has nothing to do with the meaning of ‘yoke’. Zimmern’s book, which Hanson quoted to classify the words of ‘lamp’ and ‘yoke’ in accordance with Semitic languages, did not give the meaning of ‘yoke’ but it only gave meaning of ‘cultivated field’ to the Hebrew term *nîr*.³⁸ Here, it is interesting to note Noth’s position in relation to the meaning of the noun *nîr*. Hanson concludes that ‘Noth is justified in questioning the otherwise unquestioned translation “lamp”, inasmuch as the sense it is supposed to convey is far from transparent, and since there is no evidence for an ancient Israelite tradition of “eternal lamp” in either the

Preis der Kutarāt-Göttinnen: ein kultisch-magischer Text aus Ras Schamra (Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1968), 11.

³⁶ L. Koehler, et al., eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 697. In *BDB* 644, *nîr* is suggested as an assumed root of *mānōr* (cross beam of the loom) by citing Syriac *nîr* (yoke). Even though the Late Hebrew term *nîr* is etymologically connected with the meaning of ‘yoke’, the root is not used in the Old Testament. The dictionary simply defines the word as ‘the system of heddles’.

³⁷ E. König, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1910), 276.

³⁸ H. Zimmern, *Akkadische Fremdwörter als Beweis für babylonische Kultureinfluss* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915), 42.

homes or the cultic places'. He then he proposes a better alternative (yoke) for the noun *nīr* (1 Kings 11:36) from the cognate languages.³⁹ Of course, Noth did not translate the word to mean 'yoke' but interpreted it as a 'new beginning' (Neuanfang) in the sense of a 'newly broken field' (Neubruch) and explained the succession of David's dynasty.⁴⁰ However he thereafter recanted and followed the traditional translation in his commentary on 1 Kings. He enumerated the three puzzling renderings of the Septuagint and found the meaning of 'lamp' for the Hebrew word in λύχνον (2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). He concluded that here the Hebrew term *nīr* is equal to *nēr* as *nr* is to *nyr* in Ugarit, and the popular translation 'lamp' is right.⁴¹

In consideration to the use of the Hebrew term *nīr*, it should have been frequently used in various contexts, if it means yoke. However, only the Hebrew **יָל** ('*ōl*) is used for the meaning of yoke derived from the Canaanite *hullu* in the Old Testament. Even in situations that require the expression of political rule and dominion, the word *nīr* is never used, but only '*ōl* is written (Deut. 28:48; Isa. 14:25; Jer. 28:14). Therefore, it is natural that the Hebrew term *nīr* is rendered as 'light/lamp' rather than as 'yoke' in the Old Testament.

3.4 Translations of the Hebrew term **נִיר** (*nīr*) in ancient versions

In this section, we will examine the translations of the word in the Septuagint, Targum, Peshitta, and Vulgate, which Hanson often mentioned (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). The rendering of the Hebrew term in each version will be considered and evaluated.

The Septuagint demonstrates inconsistency in the translation of the word by giving three different words. The varied renderings may imply that the Hebrew term *nīr* was unfamiliar to the translators of the Septuagint. The three cases will be examined as follows: (1) The word *nīr*, concerning Ahijah's prophecy (1 Kgs 11:36) to Jeroboam, is read as 'position' (θέσις). This Greek word can mean a position with a duty, but it has too comprehensive an idea to denote dominion or throne. We wonder whether the translator gave his mind to the meaning of the Aramaic word *nīr* (yoke) or simply made a free translation to the Hebrew word *nīr* (light/lamp). (2) The Hebrew word *nīr*, related to the

³⁹ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 310-11.

⁴⁰ M. Noth, 'Jerusalem und die israelitische Tradition', in H. W. Wolff, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 179.

⁴¹ M. Noth, *Könige* [1-16], BKAT (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1968), 243-44, 261.

basis of divine mercy on Abijam (1 Kgs 15:4), is translated as ‘remnant’ (κατάλειμμα). The Septuagint appears to have read it in accordance with the content; i.e., David’s descendant will remain forever. (3) The Hebrew word *nīr*, proposed as God’s grace to Jehoram, the wicked king of Judah, (2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7) is put as ‘lamp’ (λύχνος). The translator understood the Hebrew word *nīr* as a variation of *nēr*, which is a metaphorical expression for the successive descendants of David.

The Targum Jonathan including the Targum Chronicles, which Hanson accepted as the best translation, shows a consistency in rendering the Hebrew word *nīr* as the Aramaic term מַלְכוּ (malkū) in these four texts (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). The Aramaic word *malkū* basically means ‘kingdom,’ but it also stands for ‘kingship’ and ‘dominion’. Three possibilities about the Aramaic version would be suggested. (1) The translators could read the Hebrew letters *nīr* as the Aramaic *nīr*, which means yoke. Then, the Aramaic *malkū* can be an interpretative expression of yoke, which illustrates the hermeneutical character of Targum, for the translators employed literary devices that belong to the Jewish hermeneutic method called *derash*.⁴² (2) The Aramaic word can be a theological expression connected with David’s throne, regardless of the exact understanding of the Hebrew word *nīr*. In other words, the Aramaic phrase might be derived from ‘David’s covenant’: ‘And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever’ (2 Sam 7:16).⁴³ (3) The Aramaic translation exposes an interpretation of the metaphorical term *nīr* (light/lamp). The assumption is that the Aramaic translators read the Hebrew term *nīr* as ‘lamp’ and construed the expression as *malkū* (kingdom/kingship) with a concrete representation. This is supported by a kind of etiological explanation about Saul becoming king and the naming of his grandfather Ner: ‘Ner, who was called Abiel, became the father of Kish. They called him Ner because he used to light the lamps in the schools and synagogues, and this merit enabled Saul, his grandson, to

⁴² Josep Ribera, ‘The Targum: From Translation to Interpretation’, in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 218.

⁴³ Translations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise stated.

become king, for kingship is compared to a lamp' (1 Chr. 8:33a).⁴⁴ The Aramaic translation (or interpretation) of this passage looks ridiculous but gives an important clue to understand the relation of Hebrew words *nīr* to *nēr*. The Targum of Chronicles provides us with the information that the naming of Ner was given by his office in charge of lamps, and a 'lamp' (*š^erāḡā*) is used as a kind of metaphor or parallel of 'kingship' (*malkūtā*),⁴⁵ since the Aramaic verb *m^etal* means 'to compare' and 'to be likened.'⁴⁶ The link between 'kingship' and 'lamp' clarifies the reason why the translators of Targums consistently rendered the Hebrew word *nīr* as the Aramaic term *malkū*. It reveals that they perceived the Hebrew word *nīr* as a variation of *nēr*. It means that the Aramaic version for this word was not influenced by the Akkadian word *nīru*. Thus, this connection between two words in Targum directly refutes Hanson's contention that the Aramaic translation of the word reflects the meaning of the Akkadian term *nīru* (yoke).

Unlike the Septuagint, the Peshitta consistently translated all the Hebrew words in question as 'light/lamp' (*š^erāḡā*). The Peshitta read the Hebrew word *nīr* as a variation of the word *nēr* and gave a literal rendering to it. In my opinion, this Syriac version provides the exact translation,⁴⁷ if we evaluate various versions in the category Hanson treated: the Peshitta clearly treated the Hebrew homonym as 'fields' (*ḥaqlātā*) and 'light/lamp' (*š^erāḡā*) in Numbers and in historical books respectively.

⁴⁴ *Targum Chronicles* (Hebrew Union College, 2005); J. S. McIvor, 'The Targum of Chronicles', in *The Aramaic Bible*, ed. M. McNamar (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 77-78.

⁴⁵ While *malkūtā* is Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and *malkū* is Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, there is no difference in a sense. Jewish Babylonian Aramaic term *š^erāḡā* too has the same meaning as the Hebrew noun *nēr*. M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic & Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 681, 1177; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990), 310.

⁴⁶ *Babylonian Talmud Tarctate Ber 53 b* (32): מְשֹׁם דַּמְחִילָא כְּנִסְתָּא לְיִזְנָה ('because the community of Israel is likened to a dove'), <http://call.cn.huc.edu>, accessed 13 April 2016.

⁴⁷ The Peshitta reads the Hebrew term נִירָם (*nīrām*) as a noun and rendered it as 'fields' which is another meaning of the word. It would be regarded as the best translation of the word, if it is written as a noun. However, the Syriac feminine, plural, and emphatic word *ḥaqlātā* (fields) does not match the Hebrew singular and masculine verb *āḇad*. Cf. C. Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik* (Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1962), 38. Thus, the exact translation may have to be 'their field.'

The Vulgate is consistent in translating the Hebrew word as ‘lamp’ (lucerna) in historical books. The consistent translation of the Vulgate proves that Jerome also understood the Hebrew noun *nīr* as a variation of *nēr*.

In summary, the Peshitta, Vulgate and Targum read the Hebrew *nīr* equal to the word *nēr*. While the first two versions gave a literal translation of the word, the last one made an interpretation of it rather than as a translation. In the case of the Septuagint, two texts show a free translation of it (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4), and the other two texts offer a literal one (2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). From the examination of ancient versions, it is observed that their translators understood the meaning of the Hebrew term *nīr* as ‘light/lamp.’

3.5 The Hebrew Term נִיר (*nīr*) and the Covenant

Hanson illustrated the use of the Hebrew word *nīr*, which was used in the relationship between the suzerain and the vassal. He quoted a sentence from the last example in the Amarna letters, which were previously mentioned, containing two alternative terms for ‘yoke’: ‘The front of the yoke of the king, my lord, is placed for my neck and I will carry it.’⁴⁸ This text contains a kind of oath of loyalty to the suzerain. He states that this is a technical term derived from the Assyrian court. However, it is still doubtful that the legal term was used as a phrase of the covenant between Yahweh and David’s dynasty in the Old Testament. First, the term ‘yoke’ was never used to express the relationship between Yahweh and David’s dynasty. Instead, ‘David’s covenant’ is represented as ‘an eternal covenant’ (2 Sam. 23:5) or ‘a covenant of salt’ (2 Chr. 13:5). Second, the covenant in the Old Testament is different from the suzerainty treaty in Assyria, which was described as ‘yoke’. In the case of the Old Testament covenant, it started from one side, while its process was mutual, demanding covenantal duty. For instance, God alone passed between the cut animals, which means ‘self-curse,’ when he made the covenant with Abram.⁴⁹ This occasion guarantees the fulfilment of his promise and demonstrates God’s infinite mercy. This scene is not in harmony with

⁴⁸ EAT 296.37-39. Hanson just followed Knudtzon’s transliteration and translation but his translation of a verb is not proper as mentioned in note 19: ‘Ich habe gelegt ...’ should be rendered as ‘It is placed ...’ [š]a-[ak]-n[a-t]i p[a-n]a (šaknati pāna)

⁴⁹ W. Zimmerli, *Grundriss der alttestamentlichen Theologie*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1985), 50.

the negative connotation of Assyrian suzerainty pact at all.⁵⁰ Yahweh is not like a suppressing monarch but is characterized by great mercy (Exod. 34:6). While a vassal should take an oath of loyalty to the suzerain in Assyrian documents, it is Yahweh not David, who has sworn to his vassal and will fulfill the promise (Ps. 89:3-4). Third, relating to the second, the phrase 'the Davidic covenant' occurred after the prophecy of Nathan was given. Strictly speaking, it is God's promise to David (2 Sam. 7:12-16). On account of the character of the promise, Yahweh unilaterally keeps the Davidic dynasty regardless of its unfaithfulness in the covenant. God's promise to David has a concrete Messianic hope in the extension of the Abrahamic promise (Gen. 12:2-3). In consideration of the above-mentioned points, it does not appear to be suitable to apply the practice of the suzerainty pact of Tiglath-Pileser to 'Davidic covenant' as Hanson prefers the Hebrew word *nîr* to mean yoke.⁵¹

4. The Meaning of 'David's Light/Lamp' (*nîr*)

The statement that there would be a lamp for David was delivered by Ahijah, the prophet, when he informed Jeroboam that he would rule ten tribes, but Solomon's throne would always remain in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 11:34:39). The term 'light/lamp' was used as a security for divine mercy on Abijam and Jehoram, the unfaithful kings (1 Kgs 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). The expression 'light/lamp' concerned with David may have to be seen as dependent on the phrase 'light/lamp of Israel' (2 Sam. 21:17). In addition, the real foundation of the phrase 'David's light/lamp' lies in God's promise to David (2 Sam. 7:12-16). 'David's light/lamp' is a metaphor for the eternal dynasty in the promise, which is a sign of living dynasty (2 Sam. 14:7).⁵² The practical meaning of this phrase is found in the following texts.

In 1 Kings 11:36, Ahijah's prophecy to Jeroboam, that a light/lamp will always be in Jerusalem, indicates that the descendants of David will continue in Jerusalem.⁵³ Actually, this prophecy was given as a

⁵⁰ Cf. Cogan, *II Kings*, 95.

⁵¹ Hanson, 'David's Nir', 313.

⁵² A. van der Kooij, 'David, "het licht van Israel"', in A. Hulst, *Vruchten van de uithof* (Utrecht: Theologisch Instituut, 1974), 53-54.

⁵³ The Hebrew phrase *kol-hayyāmîm* is mainly translated as 'always' but sometimes as 'still' (Job 1:5).

follow-up measure after the separation of ten tribes ruled by Jeroboam on account of Solomon's idolatry. The promise of the 'light/lamp' began to apply to Rehoboam, Solomon's son.

In 1 Kings 15:4, the promise of the 'light/lamp' is applied to Abijam, the successor of Rehoboam. The fact that he walked in all the sins that his father did before him (1 Kgs 15:3) means that the succession of David's dynasty was under threat. Nevertheless, for the sake of David, Yahweh gave him a 'light/lamp' in Jerusalem, setting up his son after him and establishing Jerusalem. Here, the word *nîr* is connected with the succession of the descendent. In Chronicles, he gained victory during Jeroboam's attack, even though he was inferior in numbers (2 Chr. 13:3-18). His survival in this war may have to be considered in the light of the promise to David.

In 2 Kings 8:19 and 2 Chronicles, 'Yahweh was not willing to destroy the house of David (Judah), for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a light/lamp to him and to his sons forever.' Due to his promise, God reserved his total punishment for Jehoram who was involved in severely wicked practice. In other words, he was not pleased to destroy the whole house of David because of the promise for the redemption of all peoples through the Messiah who would be born in Davidic dynasty. Jehoram's sin led his palace to be plundered by the attack of Philistines and Arabians and personally suffered from a chronic disease, which was the cause of his death. He himself met a tragic end, but his throne was preserved by the succession of Ahaziah (2 Chr. 21:18-22:1).

All the uses of the term *nîr* in the three texts refer to the successive descendants of David. In relation to the light/lamp of Israel (2 Sam. 21:17) symbolizing David, the expression that the light would always be in Jerusalem meant that the descendants of David would not cease. Here, we can indicate that the translation, 'the light of Israel' is better than 'the lamp of Israel' because while it is possible to express 'the lamp of house,' but it is more clumsy speak of 'the lamp of Israel'. From the point of view of language, it seems that 'light' is a better translation of the noun than 'lamp' (AV, Peshitta).⁵⁴ Light signifies the continuation of the Davidic dynasty through which Jesus Christ, the True Light, will come and, his dominion will eventually be

⁵⁴ Van der Kooij, 'David, "het licht van Israel"', 54.

established.⁵⁵ From this perspective, the 'light' is regarded as a translation for the word *nīr*.

5. Conclusion

It is hard to accept Paul Hanson's assertion that the Hebrew term *nīr* means 'yoke' on the basis of the Akkadian cognate *nīru* for the following reasons. First, it is improbable that the Hebrew word *nīr* was employed with the meaning of political dominion if we take into consideration the use of the phrase in the letter to Amarna. The Hebrew term **נֵר** (*ōl*) has always been used to signify 'yoke' in the Old Testament. Second, the Akkadian noun *nīru* also means 'light'. Third, the Hebrew *nīr* can be regarded as a variation of *nēr*, which is common in Ugarit and in the Old Testament. Fourth, the translation of the Targums, to which Hanson appealed, reads the Hebrew *nīr* as 'lamp' rather than as 'yoke', which reflects the Akkadian *nīru*. The translators knew that kingship is compared to a lamp (1 Chr. 8:33a; 1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr. 21:7). Fifth, the Peshitta and the Vulgate have consistent renderings for the Hebrew term *nīr* as 'light' and 'lamp', respectively. In my opinion, the Peshitta gives us the better translation for this phrase. Sixth, it seems improper to apply the use in an Assyrian suzerainty pact to the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and David. Seventh, while the translation of the Hebrew *nīr* is 'light,' either 'dominion' or 'kingship' may be an interpretation. Therefore, I contend that the reason why the Hebrew *nīr* is still translated as 'light' or 'lamp' is because the term actually means 'light' not 'yoke'.

⁵⁵ A link between the Hebrew term *nīr* and the Egyptian word *nr* (power) is a significant interpretation in relation to Messianic dominion. However, it is not easy clearly to explain the connection of two words. Manfred Görg, 'Ein "Machtzeichen" Davids 1 Könige XI 36', *VT* 35 no. 3 (July 1985), 363-68.