

# ‘WE REALLY SHOULD STOP TRANSLATING נִיִּר IN KINGS AS “LIGHT” OR “LAMP”’

A RESPONSE

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## Summary

*This essay responds to Deuk-il Shin’s recently published ‘The Translation of the Hebrew Term NĪR: “David’s Yoke”?’ I contend that Shin’s argument does not do enough to counteract Douglas Stuart’s call to stop translating נִיִּר in Kings as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’. Among other things, Shin does not consider important contributions to the discussion, which therefore renders his argumentation deficient. All things considered, Ehud Ben Zvi’s suggestion of territorial dominion is most appropriate.*

## 1. Introduction

In a recent article,<sup>1</sup> Deuk-il Shin questioned Douglas Stuart’s insistence that continuing the translation of נִיִּר in 1 and 2 Kings (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19) as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’ perpetuates a problem.<sup>2</sup> In his argument, Shin interacts heavily with Stuart’s inspiration, a 1968 article by Paul Hanson, which argued that נִיִּר in Kings should be rendered ‘dominion’, based on a metaphorical understanding of the Akkadian *nīru*, ‘yoke’.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, Shin concludes that Hanson and,

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<sup>1</sup> Deuk-il Shin, ‘The Translation of the Hebrew Term NĪR: “David’s Yoke”?’ , *TynBul* 67.1 (2016): 7-21.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Stuart, ‘David’s “Lamp” (1 Kings 11:36) and “A Still Small Voice” (1 Kings 19:12)’, *BibSac* 171 (2014): 3-18, esp. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, ‘The Song of Heshbon and David’s NĪR’, *HTR* 61 (1968): 297-320.

by implication, Stuart are in error. Instead, Shin advocates that נִיר in Kings should continue to be rendered as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’.

This brief essay is a response to Shin. While some of his criticisms of Hanson are noteworthy, the overall presentation is incomplete, particularly since it failed to consider other important publications. I argue that the translation the נִיר passages in Kings as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’ is improper. Instead, rendering נִיר as ‘territorial dominion’ is preferred.

## 2. Shin’s Argument

Shin opens his discussion with a look at the original sources – three texts from the Amarna archives. Similarly to Hanson, Shin notes the relationship between the words *nīru* and *hullu*, but he ponders the appropriateness of Hanson’s conclusions. Shin questions whether *nīru* contained the sense of ‘dominion’ in the fourteenth century, suggesting that its place within the discussion of the נִיר passages in Kings is either improper or distracting. Shin states,

[I]t is possible that the scribe added the Canaanite *hullu* to *nīru* not for the sake of the Egyptian king but for the Canaanite monarch to understand the meaning of the term *nīru*. That is to say, the metaphorical meaning of the Akkadian term *nīru* might not have been well known to a Canaanite at the time.<sup>4</sup>

Shin also solicits cognate and Hebrew support for his position. A Middle Akkadian hymn as well as onomastic evidence supports the presence of the homonym *nīru*, meaning ‘light’, within Akkadian.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is variation within Akkadian that ostensibly supports the traditional translation of נִיר as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’. With respect to Hebrew, Shin appeals to the historical development of the root נור, stating that, while rare, it is not impossible to have a long-i be the result of phonological and morphological developments.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Shin suggests that *nīr* is a variation of *nēr*, and he appeals to *scriptio defectiva* v. *scriptio plene*, Ugaritic parallels, and 2 Samuel 22:29 for support.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 12

<sup>5</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 13

<sup>7</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 13-15.

An important, but somewhat confusing, element of Shin’s argument is his treatment of ancient versions and their translation of the נִיר passages.<sup>8</sup> Recognising the lack of uniformity within the LXX, Shin cites the Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targumim as support for his position. The Peshitta and Vulgate clearly understand נִיר as ‘light’, but his claim of support by the Targumim is somewhat surprising given that each occurrence is translated with מְלָכוֹ. Instead of accepting the plain sense of ‘dominion’,<sup>9</sup> Shin appeals to the Targumic rendering of 1 Chronicles 8:33a; according to Shin, it testifies to an association between ‘kingship’ and ‘light’. Thus, מְלָכוֹ is the ‘concrete representation’ of an idea.<sup>10</sup>

To his credit, Shin highlights a number of worthy considerations, including the problem of imperial imagery with the Akkadian use of *nīru* in monumental literature. Simply put, there are nuances within the Akkadian usage that do not comport well with the biblical context (see below). However, is this, as well as his other contentions, enough to counteract the call by Stuart to stop translating נִיר in Kings as ‘light’ or ‘lamp’?

### 3. Assessing Shin

It appears that Shin is unaware of Ehud Ben Zvi’s article ‘Once the Lamp Has Been Kindled ... A Reconsideration of MT Nīr in 1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19 and 2 Chr. 21:7’.<sup>11</sup> This is a significant lacuna, as Ben Zvi’s is an important article within the discussion of the נִיר passages of Kings. Ben Zvi not only echoes Hanson in the sense that the traditional translation of ‘light’ or ‘lamp’ is dubious, but, and more importantly, he engages the debate from an overtly philological angle. Invoking the principles of James Barr’s *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*,<sup>12</sup> Ben Zvi allows Hebrew linguistic data to

<sup>8</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 15-18.

<sup>9</sup> M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalami, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996): 791-92.

<sup>10</sup> Shin, ‘Hebrew Term NĪR’, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ehud Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp Has Been Kindled ... A Reconsideration of MT Nīr in 1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19 and 2 Chr. 21:7’, *Australian Biblical Review* 39 (1991): 19-30.

<sup>12</sup> James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

dictate.<sup>13</sup> As such, he connects the נִיר passages of Kings with other forms of the root נִיר, and argues that ‘territorial dominion’ is the most appropriate translation.<sup>14</sup>

Most important to Ben Zvi’s presentation is his discussion on the morphological and phonological phenomena of a nominal form descending from a hollow root, either נֹור or נִיר. Simply put, the expected contractions result is נִר and not נִיר. Therefore, Ben Zvi asserts that nothing demands נִיר to be a bi-form of נִר. Furthermore, there is significant evidence to suggest that נִיר is a bi-consonantal nominal form with a historically long-i in the medial position.<sup>15</sup> For example, Ben Zvi points to Jeremiah 4:3, Hosea 10:12, and Proverbs 13:23 where the form נִיר appears and cannot mean ‘light’ or ‘lamp’.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, ‘One has to conclude that the MT considers *nîr* and *nēr* as two different, non-interchangeable words’, a distinction that is testified to in post-biblical Hebrew and biblical Hebrew’s cognates.<sup>17</sup>

The implications of Ben Zvi’s study for Shin’s presentation include the following. First, Shin’s assertion that נִיר stems from the root נֹור is countered, which incidentally is suspect by his own admission. Second, it is improper to say that the נִיר passages of Kings are an orthographic variation of the more popular נִר. Any appeal to *scriptio defectiva* v. *scriptio plene*, Ugaritic, and 2 Samuel 22:29 is not only countered by the philological evidence within biblical Hebrew, but it also does not explain away the possibility that נִיר in Kings bears witness to a bi-consonantal word with a historically irreducible long-i.

I have also contributed to this discussion,<sup>18</sup> and some of those contributions touch upon a few of Shin’s concerns. For example, in multiple locations, Shin asks, if the sense of the נִיר passages in Kings is

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Cognate languages, however, provide only potential Hebrew meanings. This being the case, one should conclude that the existent Hebrew corpus and the context in which the term is used in Hebrew provide the main criteria to discern the most probably meaning of a biblical word, literally as well as metaphorically.’ Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp’, 22. This contrasts with Hanson, who privileges the comparative data.

<sup>14</sup> This is metaphorically derived from ‘field’. Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp’, 30. Interestingly, Shin recognises these same connections, even recognising a homonym meaning ‘soil,’ but he eventually dismisses the connection and sides with Noth’s revised translation exhibited in his commentary on Kings. Shin, ‘David’s Yoke?’, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp’, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp’, 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> Ben Zvi, ‘Once the Lamp’, 26.

<sup>18</sup> David B. Schreiner, ‘Why נִיר in Kings?’, *JSOT* 39.1 (2014): 15-30.

‘yoke’, as maintained by Hanson, then why did the writer not use עֵל, the common term in biblical Hebrew?<sup>19</sup> The implication espoused by Shin is that a popular term would not have resulted in confusion and mistranslation. Admittedly, this is a difficult question, as evaluating issues of personal style can only be answered in terms of probabilities based on the evidence gleaned from the text. Nevertheless, I have suggested the reasons behind the use of נִיר in Kings may be rhetorical. More specifically,

The נִיר passages of Kings can be characterized as an *inferencing-allusion triggered by metaphoric wordplay*. With each occurrence of נִיר, which explicitly expounds the ideology that the Davidic line will continue in spite of political and spiritual obstacles, wordplay encourages the audience to recall the role of the royal institution articulated in 2 Sam 21:17, which in turn adds another dimension to the semantics of these passages. Due in large part to David, his covenant, and the promise of perpetual dominion offered to him, the Davidic line, which enjoys divine sanction and guidance, will endure in spite of its dwindling sphere of influence and occasional apostasy because it is God’s chosen instrument to secure the endurance and vitality of the community.<sup>20</sup>

If one agrees with Hanson and concludes that נִיר in Kings means ‘yoke’, and thus metaphorically ‘dominion’, then it is possible to envision a satirical expression behind the passages, again suggesting a rhetorical reason for utilising נִיר in Kings. By utilising a rare word, the Judean historian invoked a particular convention used in Neo-Assyrian monumental literature to assert, subtly but artistically, Judean prominence in the face of Neo-Assyrian presence.<sup>21</sup> Yet this brings one back to a critical problem with understanding נִיר in Kings as Hanson does – the idea of ‘yoke’ in Neo-Assyrian royal literature imports a imperialistic connotation that does not fit into the context of Kings with its assumption of an Israelite audience and the implications of the

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<sup>19</sup> Shin, ‘David’s Yoke?’, 15,21.

<sup>20</sup> Schreiner, ‘Why נִיר’, 29, emphasis original.

<sup>21</sup> Such a move would have served Hezekian or Josianic endeavours well, both of whom represent socio-historical contexts to which the נִיר passages of Kings have been dated. For example, see Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1988): 144-80; Richard Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 116-118; Iain W. Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings* (BZAW 172; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988): 131.

Davidic covenant. I contend, therefore, this consideration helps tilt the scales in favour of Ben Zvi's argument against Hanson.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Shin concludes his argument with seven points of emphasis, and so it is worth revisiting them point by point as this essay concludes.

1. Shin maintains that if the sense intended by the historian was that of 'yoke', as maintained by Hanson, then confusion and mistranslation would have been avoided if the more popular עַל were used.

Answer: I have argued in detail that rhetorical concerns are likely behind the use of נִיר in Kings.

2. Akkadian attests to a homonym *nīru*, meaning 'light'.

Answer: This is true, but it does not explain away the possibility for 'yoke'.

3. נִיר is a variation of נִיר.

Answer: This is extremely dubious. It appears to privilege Akkadian evidence over that within biblical Hebrew (see immediately above). Moreover, Ben Zvi's argumentation is methodologically impressive and ultimately convincing.

4. The Targumim translation of מְלִכּוֹ actually supports the translation of 'light' or 'lamp.'

Answer: Shin's argument here is convoluted and works against the plain sense of the Aramaic. Furthermore, the crux of his argumentation depends on the Targumic expansion of a passage in 1 Chronicles.

5. The Peshitta and Vulgate clearly understand נִיר in the sense of 'light' or 'lamp.'

Answer: While this is correct, it only proves how the ancient translators understand נִיר. It does not prove that they understand נִיר properly.<sup>23</sup>

6. The imperial connotations associated with the Neo-Assyrian usage of *nīru* as 'yoke' do not comport well with the nuances of Kings.

Answer: This is a worthy criticism of Hanson and contributes to the preference for Ben Zvi's argument.

7. Emphasising that נִיר in Kings means 'light' or 'lamp', Shin concedes that 'dominion' or 'kingship' are acceptable translations, so

<sup>22</sup> Schreiner, 'Why נִיר', 26-27.

<sup>23</sup> For details, see Schreiner, 'Why נִיר', *passim*.

long as one realises that they are interpretations based on the semantics of 1 Kings 11:36; 15:4, and 2 Kings 8:19.

Answer: This is convoluted and ultimately erodes his argument.

In the end, Shin does not effectively counteract Stuart's call to action, particularly since his study does not consider important voices and considerations within the debate. Consequently, I echo Stuart in stating that scholars and translators should stop rendering the נִיר passages in Kings as 'light' or 'lamp'. The question that remains is whether Ben Zvi or Hanson represents the best way forward. Hanson emphasises the comparative angle and assumes that because Hebrew's cognate languages exhibit a bi-consonantal noun with a historically long-i meaning 'yoke' grounds exist to assume the same for Hebrew. Ben Zvi accepts Hanson's possibility, but prefers to let the Hebrew data lead the way, a position with which the present writer is inclined to agree. Thus, נִיר in Kings should be associated with the known semantic field of 'soil' or 'land'.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Ben Zvi's 'territorial dominion' is remarkably similar to Hanson's 'dominion'. Nevertheless, the path toward a consensus is set, but more evidence is necessary before one will be reached.

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<sup>24</sup> HALOT, 1:696-97.