

A Note on 2 Samuel 18.18

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In a redactional gloss to the account of the death of Absalom in 2 Sam, a monument (*maṣṣibah*) well known to the contemporaries of the redactor is connected with Absalom, who is said to have set it up for himself in the "Valley of the King"¹; the monument is also called a *jāḏ*, a term which in several occurrences in the OT clearly refers to a stela², suggesting that the monument in question is also a stela. We are told by the Biblical writer that the reason Absalom set up this stela for himself, calling it by his own name, was that he had no son by whom his name might be remembered. As a parallel for this practise a passage from the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat is often cited³, in which Baal pleads with the divine assembly on behalf of Daniel⁴:

Then bless him, O bull El my father,
Grant him thy benediction, O Creator of Creation.
And may there be a son for him in the house,
Even a root in the midst of his palace,
One who may set up the stele of his ancestral god⁵
In the sanctuary which enshrines his forefather.

The passage illustrates that in Ugaritic society one of the duties of the "ideal son"⁶ was to set up a stela for his deceased father; it is assumed

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- 1 On this locality see P. Kyle McCARTER jr., *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible (New York, 1984) p.408.
 - 2 See McCARTER, *op.cit.* p.248f.
 - 3 2 Aqhat i.24ff. See C. CONROY, *Absalom, Absalom! An.Bib.81* (Rome, 1978) p.65 and n.88; W.F. ALBRIGHT, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1968) p.106; P. Kyle McCARTER *op.cit.* p.407ff.
 - 4 Translation of John GRAY, *The Legacy of Canaan SVT 5* (Leiden, 1965) p.108f.
 - 5 Lit. "the god of his father", where "god" would seem to refer to the ghost or shade of the father, see Kyle McCARTER *op.cit.* p.408.
 - 6 See GRAY, *op.cit.* p.111.

that similarly, if Absalom had had a son, he would have been expected to do the same for his father. But is this parallel really very apposite?

In the words attributed to him, Absalom does not lament the fact that he has no son *who will set up a stela for him*, his statement is a lot less specific - "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance" (RSV) - with no suggestion that he expected his son to provide him with a memorial stela. Indeed ALBRIGHT⁷ considers the practise of erecting memorial stelae to the dead to have been uncommon in Hebrew tradition, which would suggest that this was not the normal way in which a son would keep alive the memory of his father.

In Egypt it was of course the custom for a son to have a memorial made for his father and on many funerary monuments from the Old Kingdom onward we come across inscriptions which expressly state that the son has done this:

in z3=f NN s^Cnh rn=f "it is his son NN who causes his name
to live".

irj.n z3=f r s^Cnh rn=f "Made by his son to cause his name
to live".⁸

However what a son did for his father went far beyond this⁹. The son was to take his father as his model, he was to follow and obey the instruction of his father, follow his father's example in all that he did, in fact he was to become the "imitator"¹⁰ of his father and so, in all his deeds, indeed by his very existence, be a "memorial" to his father. If, as ALBRIGHT suggests, the practise of setting up memorial stelae for the deceased was not widespread amongst the Hebrews, it is perhaps in this way that a son would have kept his father's name in remembrance. This is the impression given by the words of Saul in 1 Sam 24.21 - the very existence of Saul's descendants ensures the preservation of his name; should they be "cut off" then his name would also be destroyed.

7 Op.cit. p.106.

8 WB IV 47.6 & 7.

9 On the father son relationship in ancient Egypt see J. ASSMANN, *Das Bild des Vaters im Alten Ägypten*, in: *Das Vaterbild in Mythos und Geschichte*, H. TELLENBACH (Ed.), (Stuttgart, 1976) p.12ff.

10 Egyptian *znn*, cp. ΜΟΜΗΤΗΣ as used by Paul in 1 Cor 11.1 and Eph 5.1.

Although it may appear strange that it could have been thought possible for a memorial stela to replace a son and fulfill this function, we do have some evidence from Egypt that this was indeed the case.

On a number of memorial monuments of the 18th Dynasty¹¹ we read in a address to the living¹²:

$\dot{i}^C n\dot{h}.w tp.\dot{i}w t3$

$zh3.ww hr.\dot{i}w-h3b w^C b.w hm.w k3$

$m33.ti^2=sn^C h^C pn$

$znn=i^2$

$\dot{i}w^C .w=i^2 tp.\dot{i} t3$

$sh3=i^2 m hr.t-ntr$

"O you living ones upon earth,
 scribes, lector priests, wab-priests, ka-servants,
 those who will see this stela,
 my "imitator",
 my heir on earth,
 my remembrance in the necropolis....."

There can be no doubt that the monument, in this case also a stela, is designated by two terms which can really only be used of a person: *znn* "imitator"¹³ and $\dot{i}w^C .w$ "heir"; the role which should ideally have been fulfilled by a living heir, a son, has been transferred to a monument¹⁴. Since

On the Egyptian expression and its implications for the Egyptian ideal of sonship see B.G. OCKINGA, *Die Gottebenbildlichkeit im Alten Ägypten und im Alten Testament*, ÄAT 7 (Wiesbaden, 1984) p.52ff.

- 11 Four statues and two stelae, one stela and two statues belong to the same person.
- 12 Urk IV 1032.2-6. The other examples are to be found in Urk IV 1034, 1036, 412 and 1641, and in T.G.H. JAMES, *Corpus of Hieroglyphic Inscriptions in the Brooklyn Museum Vol. I* (New York, 1974) Pl. LI a & b.
- 13 In time this term actually did come to mean "image", "statue", but then does not occur in conjunction with e.g. "heir" as in the examples discussed here - see OCKINGA op.cit. p.57f.
- 14 Of the four persons involved, three (User, Senenmut and Djehuti) make no reference to children on their monuments. It is known however that User did in fact have several offspring, including three sons (see N.deG. DAVIES, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-Rē' at Thebes* (New York, 1943) pl. IX). Only in the case of Senenmut can one be relatively certain that he had no children (see Chr. MEYER, *Senenmut. Eine Prosopographische*

the situation recorded in 2 Sam is similar - because Absalom did not have a son who would keep his name in remembrance, he is said to have erected himself a memorial stela to fulfill this function - the Egyptian examples provide us with a much closer parallel than does that from Ugarit, the one usually referred to by commentators.

Untersuchung, HÄS 2 (Hamburg, 1982) p.9). Strangely enough the fourth person, Ituosiris, did have a son, who is even mentioned on the monument as "his beloved son, who keeps his name alive" (Urk IV 1642.19). It was perhaps felt that a monument as substitute for a son and heir would still be useful even if one did actually have a son, for it would continue to function after the death of the latter.