**Miktāb, Votive Thanksgiving Song, and the Prayer of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20)**

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There have been a claim that *miktāb* in the superscription of “the prayer of Hezekiah” (Isa 38:9-20) should be altered to *miktām*. *Miktām* is a word consisting of the superscriptions of Pss. 16 and 56-60, although its meaning is yet to be clarified. These superscriptions of those “miktam psalms” relate the historical situations about David’s struggle. Since Isa 38:9 tells the historical situation concerning Hezekiah’s illness, *miktāb* there is also thought to be emended to *miktām*. W. W. Hallo, who suggests the connection between Sumerian and Akkadian genre of “letter-prayer” and biblical prayer of Hezekiah, also thinks that *miktāb* and *miktām* are somehow related.

While most of the “miktam psalms” are classified into the lament genre, the prayer of Hezekiah is traditionally understood to be a thanksgiving song of an individual in which gratitude to and reliance on god play a central role. The author of this paper thinks it preferable to retain *miktāb* in Isa 38:9, by regarding the meaning of *miktāb* as “what was written,” rather than to emend *miktāb* to *miktām*, the word in a strong connection with an individual lament genre. There are some examples of showing that a thanksgiving song may have been “written.” Ps. 40 contains the verses that are considered to be a “written” prayer. Further, “the prayer of Nabonidas” from Qumran has a description of “having written” a thanksgiving prayer. Several Old Aramaic inscriptions have a dedicatory character as a means to proclaim the God’s good will. These examples make it possible to regard *miktāb* as the writing for a dedicated thanksgiving song. As long as the clearer ground to emend *miktāb* in Isa 38:9 to *miktām*, is not presented, the understanding I present in this article should be one of the possibility that keeps *miktāb* in the superscription of the prayer of Hezekiah.

**Keywords:** *miktāb, miktām*, the prayer of Hezekiah, thanksgiving song, votive text

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I. Introduction
In Isa 38:9, preceding the so-called prayer of Hezekiah (vv. 10-20), Masoretic text puts the sentence that begins with the phrases, \( \text{mi}kt\overline{b} \text{ b}\text{h}izqiyy\overline{a}h\overline{u} \), which are basically translated “a/the writing of Hezekiah” in modern English Bibles, as I cited below.

\[ mktb \text{ l}zqyhw \text{ m}lk-yhwdh \text{ b}ltw \text{ w}hy \text{ mhlyw} \]
The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness (JPSV)
The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness: (KJV)
A writing of King Hezekiah of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: (NRSV)

Translators understand, behind the word \( mkt\overline{b} \), that the king Hezekiah of Judah who suffered mortal illness wrote down the psalm, after he recuperated from it and obtained the life again by the intercession of the prophet Isaiah. This word \( mkt\overline{b} \), however, does not appear in the superscription to any other poetic composition. For this and other reasons, there have been a claim that \( mkt\overline{b} \) has to be emended into \( mkt\overline{m} \), as instructed in \( BHS \) apparatus of v. 9. \( \text{Mikt}\overline{m} \) is known as a word that consists of the superscriptions in Pss. 16 and 56-60.

In this situation, the present article thinks it unnecessary to emend the \( mkt\overline{b} \) to \( mkt\overline{m} \), but thinks that MT’s reading \( mkt\overline{b} \) should be retained. In my argument, the reason why Hezekiah may have “written down” his prayer is indicated, while the meaning of Hezekiah’s prayer in its Ancient Near Eastern context is examined.

II. Miktab or Miktam?
\( \text{Mikt}\overline{b} \) is a nominal form of the verb \( k\overline{t}ab \), “to write.” In late biblical Hebrew, the word seems to mean “proclamation” (2 Chr 36: 22) or “edict” (Ezra 1:1). \( \text{Mikt}\overline{b} \) is translated roughly as “what is written down” in modern English Bibles. However, a number of scholars and annotators do not maintain \( mikt\overline{b} \) in Isa 38:9, but the suggestions have been offered to read \( mikt\overline{m} \) instead. What \( mikt\overline{m} \) means still remains largely obscure. One explanation relates \( mikt\overline{m} \) to a noun \( ketem \) “gold” and translates it as “a golden psalm,” the meaning of which, however, would be unclear. Another interpretation makes \( mikt\overline{m} \) related to a verbal root \( k\overline{t}am \) “to cover” (cf. Akkadian \( kat\overline{amu} \). Then, \( mikt\overline{m} \) is understood as a “song of covering” or “a song of atonement.” This interpretation again has a
difficulty, because it does not necessarily correspond to the content of those psalms. Why, then, do they prefer miktäm to miktäb?

First, it is without doubt that miktäm’s similarity in the phoneme to miktäb is one of the reasons for alteration. C. T. Hodge, in his detailed analysis of the term miktäm, considered the possibility of b/m alteration, and suggested that b/m alteration is a part of a larger pattern of consonant variation that occurs in both personal and geographical names.¹ B/m confusion in Hebrew orthography suggesting that miktäb could be a corruption from an original miktäm has already been pointed out by Delitzch.² Being quite impressive but still uncertain, these arguments merely guarantee that emendation of miktäb to miktäm is a possibility.

Secondly, miktäb in Isa 38:9 is followed by a phrase that explains a historical situation, as miktäm accompanies phrases that tell alleged historical situations in Pss. 56, 57, 59 and 60. These four psalms entitled miktäm in their superscriptions are associated with historical accounts of David’s struggles (against Philistines (56), Saul (57, 59) and the Arameans (60)).

Ps. 56 lmnšš ’l-ywnā’lm rhqym ldwd mktm b’hz ’tw plštym bgt
To the leader: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. Of David. A Miktam, when the Philistines seized him in Gath. (NRSV)

Ps. 57 lmnšš ’l-tšḥt ldwd mktm bbrhw mpny-s’wl bmr’rh
To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam, when he fled from Saul, in the cave. (NRSV)

Ps. 59 lmnšš ’l-tšḥt ldwd mktm bšlḥ s’wl wyšmrw ’t-hbyt lhmytw
To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam, when Saul ordered his house to be watched in order to kill him. (NRSV)

Ps. 60 lmnšš ’l-swšn ’dw t mktm ldwd llmd bhštw ’t ’rm nhrym w’t-’rm swbh wyšḥ wy’b wyk ’t’-dwm bgv’-mlḥ šnym ’šr’lp
To the leader: according to the Lily of the Covenant. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he struggled with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt. (NRSV)

For many psalms, historical or biographical situations described in their superscriptions are thought to be supplemented by the editors of those psalms, and no relevance is assumed with those psalms themselves. On the other hand,
the words arranged in Isa 38:9 do not seem to be a superscription in the same meaning as superscriptions of those psalms. As for Isa 38:1-22, there is nothing that denies its relevance with the narrative about Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20:1-11. Therefore, miktâb in Isa 38:9 means what is written by Hezekiah himself while he was sick and recovered from illness. I have hesitations about emending miktâb to miktâm with disregarding this difference.

Thirdly and mostly, LXX translates miktâb as the word προσευχή, that generally means “prayer,” as is cited below.

προσευχή Εξειου βασιλέως τῆς Ιουδαίας ἤνικα ἐμαλακίσθη καὶ ἀνέστη ἐκ τῆς μαλακίας αὐτοῦ

The prayer of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered from his sickness.

LXX’s προσευχή meaning “prayer” is connected with Hebrew miktâm, because those psalms containing miktâm in their superscriptions are all “prayers” of lament or thanksgiving. BHS, in accordance with the translation of LXX, recommends emendation of miktâb to miktâm. HALOT also urges to do in the same manner. Kaiser\(^3\) and Wildberger\(^4\) are also in support of the emendation, depending basically on LXX’s translation. M. L. Barré, in the latest research on the prayer of Hezekiah,\(^5\) thought that not miktâb but miktâm does exist in Isa 38:9 as MT’s Vorlage. If one equally depends on LXX’s translation στηλογοφαία in Pss. 16, 56-60, not miktâm but miktâb which is related “to write (γράφω)" is assumed there as MT’s Vorlage.\(^6\) Barré explains that the translators of LXX, having no clue as to the meaning of the obscure miktâm, assumed the Greek word miktâb that was more familiar to the LXX translators than the word miktâm. He further states, “whether the word in their Vorlage ended in –b or –m they translated in every instance as if the text before them read miktâb.”\(^7\)

There is a difficulty in what Barré assumes. If one follows his assumption, miktâb (even if Barré assumes miktâm here as MT’s Vorlage) in Isa 38:9 has to be translated στηλογοφαία as well. On the contrary, LXX translates it as προσευχή. This προσευχή is a word usually used for rendering Hebrew topillâh. The LXX translators have merely understood that the content of vv. 10-20 is “prayer” as they translate topillâh appearing in many psalms as such. Since translations of LXX lack coherence and unity, I am not convinced of emending miktâb to miktâm which depends on LXX’s reading. In addition, the fact that miktâb is retained in the Qumran manuscript (1QIsa\(^a\)), however, 1QIsa\(^b\) lacks
this) works against emendation. With a number of scholars, I think it preferable that miktāb rather be retained. The meaning and location of Hezekiah’s prayer becomes clearer by thinking that it is not “a prayer as miktām” but “a prayer as miktāb.”

### III. The Prayer of Hezekiah as a Thanksgiving Song

The prayer of Hezekiah has been classified by former interpreters as a petition, a song of illness, and a thanksgiving song of an individual, and more recently as a confession of trust, and a hymn of praise. This text does not conform to the ideal form of any genre, as it consists of three parts: lament of distress (vv. 10-13), petition for relief (vv. 14-16), and thanksgiving for salvation (vv. 17-19). Verses 10-13 are expressing Hezekiah’s distress figuratively, using various similes. The expression “Sheol’s gate” is often used in individual lament psalms. Verses 11-14a liken Hezekiah to the lion breaking his bones and the moaning dove. In vv. 14b-16, the imperative “pledge security to me!” is directed to Yahweh, functioning as a righteous demand for relief from a wrong committed against Hezekiah. The second petition that Yahweh “shall make me strong and give me life” is essential. This is fundamentally a thanksgiving song in that the elements of lament and praise lend themselves to an overall intention to express thanksgiving to Yahweh for salvation from distress.

The expression ḫmartî “I have said” at the beginning of vv. 10 and 11 indicates a summary of past afflictions typical of thanksgiving song of the individual. Verse 17, which starts by the word hinneh, states that peace has replaced Hezekiah’s bitterness, and that Yahweh has favored Hezekiah and cast away his sins. Verse 17 thereby states the premise of the entire psalm that Yahweh has relieved Hezekiah from affliction.

### IV. The Prayer of Hezekiah as a Letter?

W. W. Hallo used miktāb to connect the prayer of Hezekiah to the Sumerian tradition of royal letter-prayers and therefore translated miktāb as “letter” in Isa 38:9. This miktāb, that is usually translated as “writing,” could be understood “letter” (2 Chr 21:12) in later biblical Hebrew. If such translation could apply here, Isa 38:9 may be read as “the letter of king Hezekiah of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness.” The point of contact of Sumerian letter-prayer and Hezekiah’s prayer arises here.

Hallo singled out the Sumerian letter that Sin-iddinam addressed to the healing goddess Ninisina. This letter is one of the two letters addressed by the fifth king of the Larsa dynasty. In this letter-prayer, Sin-iddinam asks the healing
goddess Ninisina for restoration of his health. The so-called letter-prayers (by Hallo; letters of petition, in my terminology) written in Sumerian are products of the Old Babylonian scribal schools. They are laments and petitions in letter-style, addressed to gods and kings by the sufferers, urging the gods and kings to release them from suffering. They usually have a lengthy opening salutation, continue with a brief self-introduction of the writer, and proceed to the body of the letter, which includes a complaint describing the consequences, and sometimes the causes, of the writer’s suffering, together with a petition for protection or relief from the suffering.

Hallo claimed that the letter from Sin-iddinam to Ninisina might be related to the prayer of Hezekiah by sharing with it these common elements: royal attribution, historical or biographical context, special emphasis on illness, pestilence, war, or other national crisis, monumental medium. It goes without saying that both Sin-iddinam letter and Hezekiah’s prayer are royally written texts. As for the historical or biographical context, in Hezekiah’s prayer, the historical situation that urged Hezekiah to pray is described before and after “prayer” (vv. 1-8, 21-22) and in the superscription (v. 9). As for a monumental medium, Hallo made a comment on this letter: “We may already conclude that this material provides an early Mesopotamian model for the notion of a king praying to the deity for recovery from illness by means of a letter inscribed on or deposited before a public monument.” Hallo thus connects the exploit of an epistolary form with the custom of offering votive gifts to the gods. The following description in the letter Sin-šamuh to Enki of the depositing of the tablet in front of the statue of a god or the deified king is one of the reasons why he claims.

u₃-na-a-dug₄ mu-ra-gub-ba-mu arhuṣ tuku-ma-[a-ab]
Have mercy on me (concerning) my letter which I have deposited before you!

Although Hallo suggested that Hezekiah’s prayer was a biblical equivalent to the Sumerian letter-prayer from Sin-iddinam to Ninisina (hereafter SIN) and tended to explain miktāb in its connection, whether Hezekiah’s prayer was written as a “letter” is still a matter of speculation. His keen insight has himself considered that Hezekiah’s prayer could have dedicatory character in relation with SIN. Form-critically speaking, however, SIN as individual lament is different from the prayer of Hezekiah in which the main focus is on thanksgiving. SIN, as a lament prayer, clearly provides an Old Babylonian model for the notion of a
king praying to the deity for recovery from illness by means of a letter. The Israelite prayer of Hezekiah, on the other hand, as a thanksgiving song, thanks the deity for deliverance from illness by means of a written thing. If there is such a difference in focus between two texts, the difference also may have caused a slight functional difference between two.

V. Miktab: A Written Thanksgiving Song as a Votive Text

Then, what circumstances made a thanksgiving song of Hezekiah put after the title of miktab? In other words, what was Hezekiah’s thanksgiving song written for? At least one case exists in the Psalter where a thanksgiving song could be written for dedication. The typical passage for this is Ps. 40:8.

\[ 'z 'mrt ty hnnh-b’ty bmglt-spr ktwb 'ly \]
Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.”

(NRSV)

Ps. 40 is a song of thanksgiving sung by the worshipper who was liberated from crisis. It arose out of the situation somewhat similar to the one that made Hezekiah wrote the prayer. Here, the “scroll” is assumed by some interpreters to be a thanksgiving song put in v. 13 and the following verses. H. J. Hermisson particularly thinks that a song of thanksgiving preserved in this “scroll” was dedicated as a votive text. He sees in it an evidence for description of the sufferer’s hardship and Yahweh’s salvation as a report, and dedicating the report to the Israelite temple. It seems to me that one could make an analogy to miktab, and think that the miktab of Hezekiah is also a written votive thanksgiving song.

The existence of this kind of written and dedicatory thanksgiving song can be confirmed also in the neighborhood of Israel. In one Aramaic text from Qumran, the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus “wrote” a thanksgiving after a miraculous recovery from his illness. In this text, we find that the king of Babylon was afflicted with a “pernicious inflammation” (ll. 1-2), lived isolated in the oasis of Teman in the Arabian Desert for seven years (l. 3), until a Jewish diviner from an exilic community absolved his sin (ll. 3-4) and healed him.

The Prayer of Nabonidus

\[ 1mly slt dy sly nbny mlk 'rb' dy b ]bl mlk' [rb' kdy hw' kty'] 2bs'h\]

1((Concerning) words of prayer of Nabonidus, king of [Ba]bylon, [the Great] King, [when he was stricken] 2with a pernicious inflammation
by the decree of G[od], in [the municipality of] Teman.

³ktyš hwyt šyny šb’ wmn [dy ] šwy ’ [nh lhyw’ wšlyt qdm ’lh’ ] ⁴wht’y šbq lh

³I was stricken for seven years, and ever since [that time] I became comparable [with the beasts. Then I prayed before God], ⁴and (as for) my offense — he forgave it.


A diviner, who was himself a Jew fr[om among the exilic community of Judea], ⁵provided an interpretation, and wrote (instructions) to render honor and gre[at]ness to the name of G[od. And so did he write]: ⁶“You were stricken with a pernicious inflammation [by the decree of God in the municipality of Teman, but] ⁷you continued for seven years to pray [before] gods of silver and gold, [bronze and iron], ⁸wood and stone (and) clay, because [you were of the opin]ion that t[hey were] (true) divinities.”

In this prayer, Nabonidus describes the effectiveness of the trust in the true god compared with ineffectiveness of the prayer to the idol. This prayer of Nabonidus is “religious propaganda under the guise of a written psalm of thanksgiving” as described by K. van der Toorn. ²³

Inscriptions that kings “dedicated” to the god as a means to make the god’s favor public are found particularly in Old Aramaic. Melqart inscription and Zakkur inscription cited below are typical among them.

Melqart inscription²⁴

³nsb’ zy šm br [h ] ²dd br [ ] ³mlk ‘rm lmr’h lmlqr ⁴t zy nzr wšm’ l [q] ] ⁵h

¹The stela which Bir-[Ha]²dad the son of [ ], ³king of Aram, set up for his lord Melqar’t, to whom he made a vow and who heard ³his ⁴[voice.]

Zakkur inscription (excerpt)²⁵

A ³nsb’ zy šm zkr mlk hmt wl’s l’lwr [b’pš ]

A ¹The monument which Zakkur, king of Hamath and Lu’ash, set up
for El-wer [in Apish.]

2

whm whwpd 'ly brhdd br ’hz’l mlk ‘rm $ 5[b’] ‘sr mlkn brhdd
wmhnh w $lk qwh wmhnh wznlk ‘mq wmhnh wznlk
grg [m ‘wnh ]nth wznlk zm ‘l wn [hnt ]h wznlk mlz [wml ]bh [nth ]
8[ ]sh‘ [t mlkn ] 9[h ]mw wmhnhw hm w$mwl kl mlky‘ ‘l mlr ‘l
hzr [k ] 10whrmw sr mn sr hzrk wh’mqw hrš mn hr [sh ] 11w’š ydy ‘l
b’ls [my ]n wy’nny b’lsmy [n wym12ll ] b’lsmy ‘ly [b ]yd h$zn wyd
w’nh ‘hšlk mn kl [mlky’ ‘l zy ] 15mlšw ‘lyk m$r wy’mr l [ y b’lsmyn
16kl mlky‘ ‘l zy mlšw  [‘l ] 17[ ] wšwr’ znh z [y ]

2I am Zakkar, king of Hamath and Lu’ash. I was a man of ‘Anah and
3Ba’lishamayn [raised] me and I stood beside me, and Ba’lishamayn
made me king over 4Hazrat. Then Bir-Hadad, son of Hazael, king of
Aram, united against me s5[even]teen kings: Bir-Hadad and his army,
Bar-Gush and his army, the [ki]ng of Que and his army, the king of
‘Amuq and his army, the king of Gurgum [and his army], the king of
Sam’al and his [arm]y, the king of Meliz [and his army]7seven
[teen], 9[th]ey and their armies. All these kings laid siege to Hazra[ch].
10They raised a wall higher than the wall of Hazrat, they dug a ditch
deeper than [its] ditch. 11Now I raised my hands to Ba’lisha[man] and
Ba’lishamayn[an] answered me. 12Ba’lishamayn [spoke] to me [th]rough
seers and diviners. 13Ba’lishamayn [said to me,] “Do not be afraid!
Since I have made [you king,] 14I will sta[nd] before you. I will save you
from all [these kings who] have 15besieged you.” [Ba’lishamayn] also
said to [me, ] 16All these kings who have besieged [you 17 ] and this
wall [ .]

B 1[ ] hzrk 2[ ] lrkb [w ]lpr3[ ] mlkh bgwh ‘n 4[b hny ]yt hzrk
whwpw 5[th ]yt kl mhgt 6[ ] ‘wmhnh ml [ ] 7[ ]th ‘ 8[ ] ‘hšny‘ ‘l
bkl gb 9[b ]nyt bty ‘lhn bk [10rq ]y wbnym yt [ ] 11[ ] ‘yt ‘pš w [ ]
12[ ] ‘yt bty [ ] 13[ ] wšmt qdm [‘l 14wr ] nšb‘ znh wkt15[b ]h ‘yt
‘sr ydy

B 1[ ] Hazrach 2[ ] for chariot [and] horseman 3[ ] its king within
it (?). I 4[built] Hazrach and added 5[to it] all [ ] defenses. 6[ ] and I
put x x 7[ ] x x 8[ ] forts on every side. 9[II] built shrines in a[II] 10my
[land ?]. I built 11[ ]x Apish and 12[ ] the house 13[ ] and I set up
before [El-14 wer] this monument and w[ro15 te on] it my achievements.
As a votive prayer, Hezekiah’s prayer, as well as these Old Aramaic inscriptions, is in the ancient Near Eastern venerable tradition. However, as van der Toorn describes, the tradition is not a tradition of letter-prayer enshrined beside the image of god as a votive lament prayer as was suggested by Hallo, but rather the votive thanksgiving prayer describing the memory of the prayer answered and publicly admiring the authority of the god who gave the answer.  

VI. Conclusion
To sum up, in this article, I wanted to indicate that the prayer of Hezekiah was written as a psalm of expressing his gratitude for the power of Yahweh who achieved healing and a writing of declaring it publicly (whether it is inscription or the letter). A passage of Ps. 40 suggests that such a habitual practice may have existed in Israel, and the Aramaic inscriptions that have the similar background to Hezekiah’s prayer are known to Israel’s neighboring. Both of these make it possible to regard miktāb as the writing for votive texts. As long as the clearer ground to emend miktāb in Isa 38:9 to miktām, is not presented, the understanding I present in this article should be one of the possibility that keeps miktāb in the superscription of the prayer of Hezekiah.

Notes
1 Hodge 1991.
2 Delitzch 1920, §114b.
4 Wildberger 1982.
5 Barré 2005.
6 Barré 2005, 38.
7 Barré 2005, 42.
8 These are some of scholars among others who see no need of emendation: Seitz 1993; Smith 2007; Sweeney 1996.
9 For summaries of various opinions, including a petition, a song of illness, and a thanksgiving song of an individual, see Begrich 1926, 2-3; Watts 1992, 124-125.
11 De Boer 1951, 185.
12 Wildberger 1982, 172.
13 Hallo 1976.
15 For these Sumerian letters, now see my dissertation: Takai 2009.
17 Hallo 1976, 213.
19 Hallo 1968, 84, l. 55. I owe special thanks to Prof. Benjamin R. Foster of Yale University, who kindly collated this line and suggested its reading to me.
20 Keel 1997, 324; Seybold 1986, 171-172.
21 Hermisson 1965, 30ff.
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23 Van der Toorn 2008.
26 Van der Toorn 2008, 40.

Abbreviations

References


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