1 KINGS VIII 23—A CASE OF REPUNCTUATION?

According to BHS, 1 Kings viii 23 reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a} & \quad \text{wayyêmar yhw}h \ 'lôhê yîśrâ'êl \ 'ên-kâmôkê \ 'lôhîm \\
\text{b} & \quad \text{bašâlamayim minma'al \ w}^\circ \text{al-hâ'âres mittâhat} \\
\text{c} & \quad \text{šômêr hâbîrît \ w}^\circ \text{ha}hê \text{ased} \\
\text{d} & \quad \text{la}^\circ \text{bâdêykê \ hâhôlêkêm} \ l'pâneyka \ b'kol-libbôm
\end{align*}
\]

The verse has no significant textual variants, and is translated in the NRSV as follows:

He said, ‘O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart’.

The sense of the passage is straightforward: YHWH is incomparable, and no rival to him can be found in heaven or on earth.

Nevertheless, the verse contains a peculiarity, the statement ‘ên-kâmôkê ‘lôhîm. Similar expressions of YHWH’s incomparability are to be found elsewhere in the Old Testament, but in each case ‘lôhîm must be supplied by the reader.\(^1\) When the nature of the comparison is made explicit, it is because this is not clear from the context. Thus, in 1 Sam. ii 2 we find ‘ên-qâdôš kayhwh . . . w\(^\circ\)\ ên šûr kêlôhênu.\(^2\) Further, the word order is different to that found in 1 Kgs vii 23: in 1 Sam. ii 2 the prepositional element is postpositive, but in 1 Kgs viii 23 it is prepositive.\(^3\)

This difficulty has not gone entirely unnoticed, and various solutions have been offered by F. Böttcher, J.A. Montgomery and C.J. Labuschagne.\(^4\) Understanding ‘lôhîm as a vocative has been rightly dismissed by Böttcher and Labuschagne. This would duplicate the vocative at the beginning of the verse. Montgomery and Labuschagne suggest, “there is none like thee as God in heaven above or on earth below”. The problematic nature of this translation is indicated by the need for the additional word ‘as’. Böttcher, on the other hand, appeals to etymology and translates, “Wo (findet man), wie Dich, einen Gott?”. For obvious reasons this solution has not commended itself to others.
A simple solution to this problem would be to emend the Masoretic punctuation to read the disjunctive accent on "ën-kāmōkā rather than "lōhīm:

\[ \text{α} \text{ wayyēmar yhwh } \text{"lōhē yiśrā'ēl } \text{ën-kāmōkā} \\
\text{αβ } \text{"lōhīm baṣšāmāyim mimma'āl wē'al-hā'ārēs mittāḥat} \]

He said, ‘O Lord, god of Israel, there is none like you, (a) god in heaven above and on earth beneath’.\(^5\)

This emendation commends itself for a number of reasons. First, it is not difficult to recognise that the verse echoes a number of statements found elsewhere in the Old Testament. There is a statement of incomparability (α), a statement about presence in heaven and on earth (αβ) and a statement, about YHWH’s character (βα). The first statement has already been examined, and the latter, which is also found in Deut. vii 9, Neh. i 5, ix 32, is not our concern. The second statement is also found in Deut. iv 39 and Josh. ii 11. On both occasions it modifies (hā)"lōhīm. Significantly, in Josh. ii 11 Rahab says, kā yhwh "lōhēkem hū" "lōhīm baṣšāmāyim mimma'āl wē'al-hā'ārēs mittāḥat, “for YHWH, your god, is (a) god in heaven above and on the earth below”\(^6\).

Secondly, a close parallel is found in Job i 8 and ii 3, "ën kāmōhū hā'ārēs ʾīš tām wē'yāšār y'rē "lōhīm wē'sār mēā, “there is none like him on earth, a man blameless and upright, fearing god and turning from evil”. A statement of incomparability is followed (after a prepositional clause) by an indefinite noun and a combination of nominal and participle clauses.\(^7\)

Thirdly, although most of the versions cannot provide any guidance on this issue,\(^8\) the Targumist might well have understood the Hebrew in the way suggested. Targum Jonathan reads, ywy ʾlh dyšr'ū lyt br mnk ʾt lwv ʾlh dškntk hšmy mLʿył wšły t ʾr mlr.

If 1 Kings viii 23 is to be translated in this way, the meaning of the verse is altered. The verse would not be a statement that no peer to YHWH can be found in heaven or on earth. Such a statement would be written, "ën-kāmōkā baṣšāmāyim mimma'āl wē'al-hā'ārēs mittāḥat. Instead, the verse proclaims YHWH’s incomparability, which is seen in his universal presence (both transcendent and immanent, we might say) and in his merciful actions towards those who follow his commands.

St Andrews  
N. MacDonald