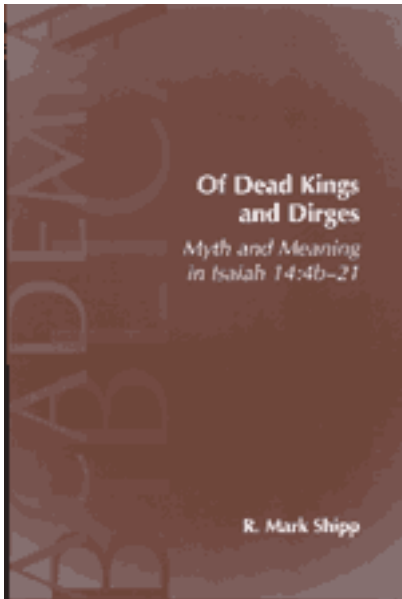


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*Of Dead Kings and Dirges: Myth and Meaning
in Isaiah 14b-21*

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The interpretation of the song mocking the king of Babylon in Isa 14, reaching for heaven but being thrown into the netherworld, keeps puzzling modern interpreters. In the tradition of the Christian church this chapter is known as the text describing the fall of Lucifer. This name is derived from the Latin translation in the Vulgate of the obscure *Helel ben Shachar* mentioned in verse 12. Since the discovery of ancient Mesopotamian texts in the nineteenth century, scholars have been looking for parallels in extrabiblical mythology for something like the downfall of this “shining one, son of dawn,” as these words can be translated literally. This was stimulated by the references found in Ugaritic literature to gods with similar names and stories about their degradation. Until now, however, there is no consensus about matters such as the precise mythological background nor about the identity of the king being addressed here.

Shipp takes up this issue in a study in which he claims to present a more adequate exploration and explanation of the form and mythological content of Isa 14. It is a slightly revised edition of a dissertation submitted to the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1997, supervised by J. J. M. Roberts, C. L. Seow, and R. Whitaker.

In his survey of the interpretation since 1928 (the discovery of ancient Ugarit) he describes how some scholars deny the presence of mythical elements, how others assume the presence of some mythological allusions in the description of a historical reality, whereas others see this complete text as a myth attached to certain rituals. Shipp notices that among these various scholars there appear to be different concepts of myth and calls for a clearer definition. After describing the views in recent anthropological studies, he suggests to define myth "as a narration of events which occurred at some point in the past or in the primordium in which the divine realm intrudes in such a way into the human realm that human behavior, institutions, or beliefs are forever altered" (31).

The next chapter is devoted to the study of the literary genre: the parody of a royal lament. The most important element of this part is the presentation of and comparison with related texts within and without the Old Testament. Shipp pays special attention to the Ugaritic text RS 34.126/KTU 1.161 (with his own translation), "The Funeral Dirge for Niqmaddu of Ugarit," and the Sumerian text "The Death of Ur-Nammu" (as translated by S. N. Kramer in his article published in 1967). In this and other texts he finds many parallels from which he concludes that we are dealing with a well-known pattern in the ancient Near East, not only with regard to the form of the royal dirge legitimizing the dynasty but also to the used mythological and cosmological elements in their relationship to the king.

Shipp makes a new effort in tracking down the origin of the epithet used for the king. He lists all possible evidence. Most of this was mentioned by other scholars before, but Shipp also suggests interesting new texts. In a text from Emar of the second millennium B.C.E. (Emar 6.3, 326–329 published by D. Arnaud in 1986) he finds a possible combination of names related to Helel and to Shachar, used in connection with an installation ritual. Unfortunately, this is no more than "a provocative possibility." The names are not precisely the same, and the installation of a king may as a rule follow the lament over his deceased predecessor, but they are not the same. Shipp takes up the identification with Ishtar (see already F. Delitzsch at the end of the nineteenth century and, more recently, M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39* [FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 237–38), but in his opinion this concerns only the second element of the epithet: Shachar. An important argument for the identification of Helel is derived by Shipp from the Ugaritic text KTU 1.24:40–42 mentioning *hll*, "the swallow." In an Akkadian astronomical text (mentioned in this connection by W. R. Gallagher, *UF* 26 [1994]: 131–46, but with different conclusions) the constellation with the same name is related to a constellation associated with Ishtar. He suggests that

Helel is a star in the constellation "the Swallow," which is located in close proximity to the constellation of the Ishtar star.

According to Shipp it is important to take notice of all mythological motifs in Isaiah 14 and not be content with this possible identification of Helel ben Shachar. Therefore he pays attention to the motif of the ascent and descent of the deceased king in the ancient Near East, to the cedar trees in a mythological context, and to the place of deceased kings in the world of the dead. Next to the Old Testament, Ugaritic and Akkadian sources, he also uses text from ancient Egypt and Sumer, pointing to the many points in which their conceptions of the cosmos are similar.

Having sketched the literary, mythological, and cosmological background, Shipp now offers "a new reading" of Isa 14, with his own translation, structural analysis, and exegesis relating the different parts of the text to the material described before. Finally, he tries to convince the reader that the king whose death is mocked in Isa 14 is the Assyrian king Sargon II.

The book is concluded by a bibliography and with indexes on texts, authors, proper names, and technical terms (in English and in the ancient languages).

Shipp has provided us with a useful survey of recent research on this beautiful song and of the many texts in the ancient Near East it can be compared with. It is to be regretted that apparently he did not have the opportunity to discuss a number of important studies on Isa 14 published after 1997, for instance, the article of J. C. Poirier, "An Illuminating Parallel to Isaiah XIV 12," *VT* 49 (1999): 371–89, defending on new grounds the old suggestion of relating Helel ben Shachar to the Greek Phaeton. Other important publications that cannot be left out of consideration in a serious modern study on this text are the books of Z. Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), esp. 73–81; H. R. Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion* (Leiden: Brill 1996); and J. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (JSOTSup 265; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000), esp. 166–84; and the articles of K. Spronk, "Down with Helel: The Assumed Mythological Background of Isa. 14:12," in *Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf* (ed. M. Dietrich and I. Kottsieper; Festschrift Oswald Loretz; AOAT 250; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag 1998), 717–726; W. L. Holladay, "Text, Structure, and Irony in the Poem on the Fall of the Tyrant, Isaiah 14," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 633–45; and M. S. Heiser, "The Mythological Provenance of Isa. XIV 12–15: A Reconsideration of the Ugaritic Material," *VT* 51 (2001): 354–69. With regard to the important Ugaritic text KTU 1.161 one should use now the state-of-the-art presentation by D. Pardee, *Les Textes Rituels* (Ras

Shamra-Ougarit 12; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 2000), part 2, 816–25), and enter the discussion with Pardee advocating here and in other publications a “minimalist view,” which means that he is not convinced by those who see this text as a reference to a cult of the dead.

When it comes to the digestion of the available literature, Shipp can be criticized for ignoring a number of important older studies, such as H. Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte der Josiazeit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1977; with much attention to literary and formal matters), and B. Gosse, *Isaïe 13,1–14,23 dans les traditions littéraires du livre d'Isaïe et dans la tradition des oracles contre les nations* (OBO 78; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988). The bibliography contains a reference to R. H. O'Connell's article on the structure of Isa 14 in VT 38 (1988): 406–18, but although the structural analysis plays an important role in Shipp's interpretation, he leaves O'Connell's interesting observations out of consideration. It is also remarkable that Shipp used the book of Sweeney on Isa 1–39, referred to above but only in the discussion of the structure of the text. He fails to mention that he partly shares the conclusions of Sweeney on the identity of Helel ben Shachar and that they agree in identifying the king as Sargon II.

More important than these flaws with regard to the use of secondary literature is that Shipp has made a big effort in looking at the text from various directions but hardly pays attention to the context of Isa 14:4b–21. If it is so important, as remarked by Shipp, to look at the structure of text, then why ignore the fact that it is presented to us as part of the oracle against the king of Babylon (Isa 13:1–14:23). In Gosse's book and my article, both mentioned above as missed by Shipp, it is demonstrated that there are many parallels between Isa 13 and 14. Both chapters also have a concentric structure. Most parallels fit within this scheme. In this way 14:12–15 can be related to 13:10–11, speaking among other things of the sun being darkened at its rising. In my opinion, this leads to the conclusion that the Hebrew phrase in 14:12 does not refer to a difficult-to-find foreign deity but to the king's arrogant idea of being able to take the highest place in heaven, as if he were the sun. Parallels for this can be found in the Old Testament, such as Ps 110:3 speaking of the king coming forth “from the womb of dawn.” The closest parallel for Isa 14 as a whole is the oracle against Tyre: its king is reproached for calling himself a god and will be punished with a shameful death. Clear Ugaritic parallels are the Hittite king being called “the sun” in a number of letters (e.g., KTU 2.16:6–10 and 2.23:1–2) and King Keret's death being described as “joining El” and as “reaching the sunset” (KTU 1.15.V:16–20).

We may conclude that Shipp's study is a useful contribution to the ongoing study of Isa 14 with a clear but incomplete survey of the history of research and the relevant parallels in and outside the Old Testament. He cannot substantiate the claim of offering important new insights, but he certainly stimulates future research.