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The Mythological Provenance of Isaiah
14:12-15: A Reconsideration of the
Ugaritic Material

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THE MYTHOLOGICAL PROVENANCE OF ISA. XIV 12-15:
A RECONSIDERATION OF THE UGARITIC MATERIAL

by

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I. *The problem of mythical provenance: the constituent elements of Isa. xiv 12-15*

Isa. xiv 12-15

12 'ek nāpaltā miššamayim hēlēl
ben-šahar
mgda'tā lā'āres hōlēš 'al-gōyim

12 How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!

13 w'attā 'āmartā bilbābekā haš-
šamayim 'ē'lē mūmma'al l'kôk'be-'ēl
'ārīm kas'î w'ēšēb b'har-mō'ed b'yark'tē
sāpôn

13 You said in your heart, 'I will
ascend to heaven; above the stars of
God I will set my throne on high; I
will sit on the mount of assembly in
the far north;

14 'ē'lē 'al-bām'tē 'āb 'eddamme
l'elyôn

14 I will ascend above the heights
of the clouds, I will make myself like
the Most High.'

15 'ak 'el-š'ôl tūrād 'el-yark'tē-bôr

15 But you are brought down to
Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. (RSV)

The poem of Isa. xiv 12-15, part of the larger literary complex of Isa. xiii 1-xiv 32, draws upon a mythological text containing ideas originating outside Palestine.¹ Scholars who have commented on the

¹ See H Wildberger, *Isaiah 13 27* (transl T Trapp, Minneapolis, 1997), p 55, J Jensen, "Helel Ben Shahar (Isaiah 14 12-15) in Bible and Tradition," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (ed C C Broyles and C A Evans, vol 1, Leiden, 1997), pp 339-56, J W McKay, "Helel and the Dawn-Goddess," *VT* 20 (1970), pp 451-64, P Grelot, "Isaie XIV 12-15 et son arriere-plan mythologique," *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 149 (1956), pp 18-48

passage often fall into two groups: those who favor in origin in the Phaethon myths of ancient Greek mythology, and those who postulate an Ugaritic source.² Unfortunately, both of these views as traditionally presented have problems, in that neither can account for all of the salient details of the Isa. xiv 12-15 taunt-song. On the one hand, I would agree that the problems associated with the Phaethon myths cannot be resolved successfully so as to demonstrate congruity between those myths and the content of Isa. xiv 12-15. On the other hand, I would contend that the Ugaritic source hypothesis suffers from the same misfortune only if conventional articulations of that hypothesis remain accepted. This paper argues that important elements of the Ba'al cycle have been either misinterpreted or not assigned proper emphasis, thereby creating the incongruities with the Ugaritic material often noted in discussions of Isa. xiv 12-15. Specifically, certain longstanding interpretations of the 'Athtar myths (*KTU* 1.2.III.1-24 and 1.6.I.43-67) have been based on assumptions brought to and imposed upon the Ugaritic text. When these assumptions are withheld and the details of these texts are carefully observed and permitted to speak, the alleged incongruities with Isa. xiv 12-15 disappear.

II. *The conventional hypothesis of an Ugaritic provenance and its difficulties*

The identity of Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar

In relation to Ugaritic mythology, Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar, "the Shining One, son of the Dawn," has been equated with 'Athtar. This correlation is due mainly to what is known of 'Athtar's behavior, but there

² For example, Craigie argues for a distinctly Ugaritic provenance (P C Craigie, "Helel, Athtar, and Phaeton [Jes 14 12-15]," *ZAW* 92 [1985], pp 223-25) Other scholars argue for a Mesopotamian source and want to trace Isaiah xiv 12-15 to either the Babylonian Irra-Myth (see W S Prinsloo, "Isaiah 14 12-15—Humiliation, Hubris, Humiliation," *ZAW* 92 [1980], p 435), or to the Gilgamesh Epic (see Robert H O'Connell, "Isaiah XIV 4b-23 Ironic reversal through concentric structure and mythic allusion," *VT* 38, 4 [1988], pp 414ff) Oldenburg argues for an origin in South Arabian religion, but as he admits, there are no myths to be found among the South Arabic inscriptions upon which to base his argument (U Oldenburg, "Above the Stars of El El in Ancient South Arabic Religion," *ZAW* 82 [1970], pp 187-208, esp 203) For this reason, his view is not presented in the body of this paper as an alternative possibility At any rate, his conclusion cannot account for the discrepancies the Ugarit hypotheses encounter (see discussion)

is also a textual basis. In South Arabian inscriptions, ‘Athtar is plainly referred to as Venus, the “Day Star.”³ Others have marshalled evidence that ‘Athtar was depicted as luminous in Ugaritic literature.⁴

A major obstacle to correlating ‘Athtar with Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar is that the Ugaritic texts are very clear that both ‘Athtar and Šāḥar were the offspring of El and Athirat.⁵ How then could ‘Athtar (if he is equated with Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar) therefore be the “son” of Šāḥar? Those who favor an Ugaritic provenance argue that there is evidence that ‘Athtar was not only identified with Venus in the South Arabian inscriptions alluded to above, but also in Canaanite religious texts.⁶ “Shining One” is also known to have been an epithet of the Morning Star/Venus in Akkadian religious texts.⁷ Since Venus (Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar) was visible in the light of the dawn before the actual appearance of the sun over the horizon, Venus could be understood as being brought forth by the dawn (Šāḥar) in astronomical, not genealogical, terms.⁸ The author of Isa. xiv 12 could conceivably have been referring to Venus, the morning star, by its epithet, “Shining One.” “Dawn” would then not be personified in Isa. xiv 12.⁹ There may therefore be no incongruity with the Canaanite material (in terms of the names used) if the phrase “son of the dawn” is understood as a reference to ‘Athtar’s (Venus’) appearance, and not a reference to genealogy, as so many scholars have presumed. There are other more significant obstacles to an Ugaritic provenance, however.

³ Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El,” pp 206ff See also M S Smith, “The God Athtar in the Ancient Near East and His Place in *KTU* 1 6 I,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C Greenfield* (ed Z Zevit, et al, Winona Lake, 1995), pp 634-36

⁴ Jensen, “Helel Ben Shahar,” p 342 The need to correlate the villain of Isa xiv 12-15 with astral terminology is the primary argument against seeing Ba‘al himself as the counterpart to Helel Ben Shahar Ba‘al is never described in such astral or luminous terms (cf N Wyatt, “The Titles of the Ugaritic Storm-God,” *UF* 24 [1992], p 419)

⁵ *KTU* 1 6 I 43-46, *KTU* 1 16 V 25-28

⁶ John Gray, “The Desert God ‘ATTAR in the Literature and Religion of Canaan,” *JNES* 8 (1949), pp 72-83, M S Smith, “The God Athtar,” p 640

⁷ Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El,” p 206, n 121 The author refers to texts where Ishtar is referred to by the epithet *elhtu* (“bright, shining”)

⁸ In other words, the genitive phrase ben-Šāḥar expresses the relationship of the individual entity to its class or category (cf phrases such as *ben ‘ādām* in Ez 11) See B K Waltke and M O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1990), p 150

⁹ Contra McKay, “Helel and the Dawn-Goddess,” pp 456-60

‘Athtar the “Usurper”

We read in Isa. xiv 13 of the blatant hubris of Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar: “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly . . .” The “stars of God” above which the villain desires to vault himself are considered by scholars seeking a link to Ugaritic literature to be those divine beings who comprised El’s council.¹⁰ This correlation appears secure, since elsewhere (Job xxxviii 7) the Hebrew Bible employs the analogous *kōk’bē bōqer* to speak of divine beings.¹¹ El’s “assembled congregation,” (*ḫr m’d*)¹² of course, met on a mountain, alternatively called the *gr ll*¹³ or the *ḫršn* [+ GN].¹⁴ The council met on a mountain that was the “sources of the two rivers,” in the “midst of the fountains of the double-deep.”¹⁵ The location was a seat of judgment and the gateway to the Netherworld.¹⁶ Interestingly, at times the meeting *place* occurs in parallel in several Ugaritic texts with the phrase *ḫr m’d*, the *assembly itself*.¹⁷ As various scholars have noted, the “assembled congregation” is a plainly evident parallel to the Hebrew *har mō’ed* (“mount of assembly”) in Isa. xiv 13.¹⁸

The wording in Isa. xiv 12, then, has been taken to mean that Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar sought either to take over El’s council itself, or had as his aim a usurpation of the leadership role of all the gods. The former would derive from an alleged Ugaritic myth of rebellion against El; the latter would reflect a revolt against Ba’al, since Ba’al was “king of the gods,” while El was “king of the cosmos.”¹⁹ An obstacle to an

¹⁰ The *ḫr kkbm* (“congregation of the stars”, cf *KTU* 1 10 I 4)

¹¹ The phrase “morning stars” is in parallelism with the “sons of God” in that text

¹² See M C A Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Dwine* (Munster, 1990), p 269

¹³ E Theodore Mullen, *The Dwine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24, Atlanta, 1980), pp 128-29 Mullen discusses the desire of some scholars to emend *gr ll* to *gr ’il*, and concludes that this is unnecessary

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp 130-32 Unfortunately, all the extant Ugaritic texts which contain the word *ḫršānu* have a following lacuna

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 133-34, see also R Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (HSM 6, Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp 35-57

¹⁶ Mullen, *The Dwine Council*, pp 128-130 The river ordeal took place here

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 129, see also Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, p 269

¹⁸ Mullen, *The Dwine Council*, p 128 See also E Theodore Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” *ABD* 2, pp 214-15

¹⁹ On this distinction (and El’s certified supremacy over Baal), see Mullen, *The Dwine Council*, pp 7-110, C E L’Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods El, Ba’al, and the Repha’im* (HSM 21, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979), pp 3-28, J C L Gibson, “The Theology of the Ugaritic Ba’al Cycle,” *Or* 53 (1984), pp 207ff

El correlation, however, surfaces when one notes that the words *har mō'ed* are followed by *b'yark'tê sâpôn* in xiv 13b (“... the mount of assembly in the far north”). The phrase could either be taken in parallel to *har mō'ed*,²⁰ or denote its location. In either case there is a problem for ascertaining an original rebellion myth against El, since *spn* (Ugaritic equivalent of Hebrew *sâpôn*) is never associated with El at Ugarit. Rather, *spn* refers to Ba'al's domicile.²¹ In an effort to rid the passage of this Ba'al element so as to maintain an El myth as the backdrop to Isa. xiv 12-15, it is typically argued that in biblical Hebrew *sâpôn* means merely “north,” and so the *b'yark'tê sâpôn* in Isa. xiv 13b may simply mean “the northern recesses,” when used by the author of the taunt-song. If this argument is accepted, there would be no problem with keeping El's domain and his council in view, and hence an original myth of rebellion against El, since El's mountain is adjudged to have towered Ba'al's from an even more northerly location.²² Unfortunately, this attempt to isolate the meaning of *sâpôn* to a directional indicator fails to do justice to the other clear Ba'al language in Isa. xiv 12-15 and other texts, such as Ps. xviii 1-2. It does no good to relieve the text of one Ba'al motif in Isa. xiv 13b while allowing the phrase *'e'le(h) 'al-bâm'tê 'ab* of Isa. xiv 14a to stand, especially in view of that phrase's placement in parallel to *b'yark'tê sâpôn*. It is much more coherent to admit that the references to one who “rides the clouds” and “ascends his mountain *Saphanu*” both plainly come from Ba'al mythology.²³ The unconvincing nature of the arguments against seeing Ba'al language in Isa. xiv 13-14 have led many scholars to see an alleged “shift” to Ba'al mythology so that the author of Isa. xiv 12-15 employed a mixture of rebellion motifs from myths about both El and Ba'al. This explication is unnecessary, for it is possible to ascertain all of Isa. xiv 12-15's mythological elements in the Ba'al-‘Athtar mythology.

A third element in Isa. xiv 14b which has confounded attempts to find a discernible Ugaritic myth behind Isa. xiv 12-15 concerns the

²⁰ Mullen takes it as such (*The Divine Council*, p 148, n 64), but Clifford does not (see the ensuing discussion and note 44 below)

²¹ Mullen, *The Divine Council*, p 149, Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, pp 58, 98-160 See also F M Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, 1973), p 36, Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, p 370, Wildberger, *Isaiah 13-27*, p 66 The relevant Ugaritic texts are *KTU* 1 4, 1 2 III, 1 3 V 5-7, 1 6 I 32-34, 1 101 2, and 1 3 III 29

²² Mullen, *The Divine Council*, p 149

²³ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, pp 161-62, n 85

divine title *‘elyôn*. Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar vowed that he would be like *‘elyôn*, the “Most High,” an epithet widely attributed by scholars to El. Based on the available evidence, however, the title *‘lyn* is not actually used of El at Ugarit.²⁴ The correlation of El with “the Most High” is actually based more on phrases describing El’s status over the pantheon and the reference outside Ugaritic literature in Gen. xiv 18 to “El *‘elyôn*.”²⁵ In their enthusiastic acceptance of the apparent connection between El and *‘elyôn*, many scholars dealing with Isa. xiv 14 have overlooked the fact that, as Wyatt points out, only Ba‘al is actually called “Most High” (*‘ly*) at Ugarit.²⁶ Consequently, an Ugaritic myth of a rebellion against Ba‘al’s status, not El’s, could be the backdrop to the taunt-song. The fact that Ba‘al was also a king is seemingly forgotten as well, due to the assumed certainty on the part of some that myths that speak of an alleged usurpation of El’s throne by Ba‘al must be the referent of any Ugaritic provenance to Isa. xiv 12-15. Much recent scholarship has dismissed this as a possibility, though, largely because it is no longer so widely accepted that the Ugaritic religious texts describe a displacement of El by Ba‘al.²⁷

The “punishment” of ‘Athtar

The last term in the taunt-song of any significance for this discussion is *š’ôl*, the realm of the dead. It is to this place that Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar is consigned after his plans go awry. Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar does not choose to abandon his pursuits; his efforts are derailed. The fate of ‘Athtar, is, on the surface, markedly different. The text plainly has ‘Athtar voluntarily leaving the throne situated at *Saphanu*, but there are scholars who see this event negatively, as though ‘Athtar felt obligated to abdicate due to El’s displeasure with his selection as Ba‘al’s replacement, or as some sort of demotion.²⁸ Moreover, the ‘Athtar

²⁴ Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, p 276

²⁵ *Ibid*, p 276, Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, pp 13-75

²⁶ Wyatt, “Titles of the Ugaritic Storm-God,” p 419 According to Wyatt, the term is used only twice, in *KTU* 1 16 III 6, 8 Another text, *KTU* 1 4 IV 44, also states that “no one is over” (*‘in d’ln*) Ba‘al See Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, p 276

²⁷ See especially in this regard Mullen, *The Divine Council*, pp 7-110, L’Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods*, pp 3-28, and J C L Gibson, “Theology of the Ugaritic Ba‘al Cycle,” pp 207ff

²⁸ For example, N Wyatt, “Who Killed the Dragon?” *AuOr* 5 (1987), p 194 On the generally negative perspective regarding ‘Athtar’s abdication, see H R Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion A Study of its Reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (VTSup 65,

myths inform the reader that 'Athtar was *chosen* to succeed Ba'al (there was no hubris on his part as far as his occupation of the throne), and that he became king of the 'ars upon his descent (as opposed to being cast into Sheol).²⁹ The apparently contradictory nature of the outcomes of the respective affairs has led scholars to conclude that the 'Athtar myth cannot stand on its own as the source of Isa. xiv 12-15.³⁰

III. Recent treatments of the 'Athtar myth and the Ugaritic mythological provenance

There have been several recent studies of 'Athtar that merit mention for our purposes at this time.

Mark S. Smith's landmark commentary on the Ba'al cycle contains a brief excursus on the god 'Athtar, but its nature is such that he does little more than introduce the reader to the interpretive options and problems. He does state, however, that "the narratives of KTU 1.2.III and 1.6.I stress that 'Athtar is not powerful enough to serve as divine king,"³¹ a comment that may or may not agree with the assessments of Page and Xella discussed below.

H. R. Page undertook a thorough re-examination of the 'Athtar myths in his recently published work on the theme of cosmic rebellion in Ugaritic literature and the Hebrew Bible. Upon creating "character profiles" of 'Athtar and Ba'al in the Ba'al Cycle, Page demonstrates that, contrary to the opinion of many commentators on the

Leiden, 1996), p 92 Page notes that "the trend toward viewing this episode as a failure on Athtar's part results from the general tendency to see all of the characters and events in the epic in light of larger hermeneutical efforts that treat Baal's death and the cosmic crisis that ensues before he is resurrected as critical events" A similar observation is made by Alastair Waterston, "that [Athtar] has 'failed' to fill the throne of Ba'al and appears subsequently demoted has, I believe, led to El's response to the elevation as being seen as negative" (Alastair Waterston, "The Kingdom of 'Athtar and his Role in the AB Cycle," *UF* 20 (1988), p 361)

²⁹ See Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*, pp 78-92 and pp 120-140 Other scholars have made similar observations of these incongruities McKay, "Helel and the Dawn-Goddess," pp 461-63, Jensen, "Helel Ben Shahar," p 342, n 11

³⁰ Some scholars have also pointed out that no equivalent term for *š'ôl* has yet been found in the texts of Ugarit, but this has little impact on the issue at hand, for the conceptual congruences are undeniable Korpel notes that the absence of an equivalent term for *š'ôl* may be "accidental," since a "goddess *Shualu*, who is apparently mistress of the realm of death, is attested in the texts of Emar" (Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, p 348)

³¹ M S Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, Volume 1 Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary of KTU 1.1-1.2* (Leiden, 1994), p 250

cycle, 'Athtar is not a weak, minor figure in Ugaritic lore.³² 'Athtar is twice explicitly referred to as the "possessor of kingship,"³³ a title that he alone receives in the epic. Page also finds it significant that, upon *voluntarily* descending from Ba'al's throne, 'Athtar not only retains this kingship, but makes himself king of the 'ars without El's approval.³⁴ This of course is in concert with 'Athtar's history of opposing El's decisions.³⁵ Despite this observation, Page only believes 'Athtar became construed as a rebellious deity, not that the 'Athtar myth casts him as such outright.³⁶ As will be noted momentarily, I believe the observation does point to the deity's rebellious nature. If 'Athtar's throne was *not* already the 'ars prior to his descent from the throne of Ba'al, then his action is highly unusual at Ugarit. As Mullen and others have pointed out, El alone is the dispenser of kingship at Ugarit, and other gods (most notably Ba'al) are repeatedly depicted as being unable to act without El's sovereign approval. Page also observes that though 'Athtar is depicted as too small for Ba'al's throne, the text contains no actual criticism by El or Athirat as to his stature. Indeed, in spite of this presumed deficiency, he is plainly not removed from the throne by El.³⁷ After culling these data, Page is convinced the elements of Isa. xiv 12-15 are Canaanite in origin, but only surmises that Isa. xiv may: (1) contain a fuller development of the fragmentary 'Athtar tradition; (2) reflect a tradition whose Canaanite prototype is lost; or (3) represent an Israelite inversion of the 'Athtar saga, so as to humiliate astral deities.³⁸ While I recognize several of Page's observations as noteworthy, I find his hesitant application of them to the question of the mythological provenance of Isa. xiv 12-15 dissatisfying.

³² This supposition has been derived from *KTU* 1 6 I 47-54, where 'Athtar is described as much weaker than Ba'al. As Page demonstrates through his profiling, this is only a relative comparison, since Ba'al is king of the gods (Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*, pp 64-78).

³³ The phrase is *dū mulki*. Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*, p 65, *KTU* 1 2 III 22 and 1 6 I 55.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p 65, *KTU* 1 6 I 63-64.

³⁵ In *KTU* 1 2 III 15-24 'Athtar very plainly takes a position of opposition against El's wishes to build Yamm a house, desiring (like Ba'al) his own. Shapash warns 'Athtar that dire consequences may result from opposing El's wishes, but 'Athtar persists. Unfortunately, the text breaks off before there is any resolution to the conflict.

³⁶ Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*, pp 51-109.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p 91.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp 139-140.

Lastly, Paolo Xella's recent contribution to the place of 'Athtar in the Ugaritic pantheon includes several key observations that certify the 'Athtar myth as the mythological well from which Isa. xiv 12-15 is drawn.³⁹ Specifically, Xella contends that those scholars who desire to hold the position that 'Athtar is some sort of ludicrous figure may only do so on the basis of a dubious interpretation of the dialogue between El and Athirat in regard to 'Athtar's candidacy for Ba'al's throne. Xella asserts that when El states that "one of feeble strength cannot run like Ba'al nor release the lance like Dagon's son when the time is right," his words are to be taken as mere statement of fact, not as a negative assessment of 'Athtar.⁴⁰ Xella supports his interpretation along several lines. First, the words of El cannot be proven to refer explicitly to 'Athtar. Second, taken at face value, Athirat's words are in agreement with El, and the two of them can think of only one conceivable candidate for Ba'al's throne: 'Athtar. Third, 'Athtar does not disappear from importance. Depending on one's view of his kingly activity to this point, 'Athtar either takes or maintains kingship of the 'ars. Finally, the grounds for 'Athtar's abortive attempt to fill Ba'al's throne are not based on 'Athtar's height, for he is never actually criticized for his size (and therefore any presumed deficiencies). It is modern scholarship that has read mockery into the account. Rather, argues Xella, it is the height of Ba'al that is the issue. The point is not that 'Athtar is weak and ineffectual, but that, as powerful as he already is—and he was the only candidate offered—'Athtar is no Ba'al.⁴¹ The point of the episode, then, is not 'Athtar's ineptitude or impotence, but that Ba'al is incomparable.⁴² This same point was argued in the past by J. C. Greenfield, who referenced the description of Marduk in the creation epic *Enuma Elish*. Marduk, like Ba'al, is depicted as being incomparably large. 'Athtar's presumed feebleness is not the issue, for every other god would have failed to fill Ba'al's throne.⁴³

³⁹ P Xella, "Les pouvoirs du dieu 'Attar Morphologie d'un dieu du pantheon ugaritique," in *Ugarit, Religion, and Culture Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion, and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994 Essays in Honour of John C L Gibson* (ed N Wyatt, W G E Watson, and J B Lloyd, Munster, 1996), pp 381-403

⁴⁰ Xella, "Les pouvoirs du dieu 'Attar," p 388 The line is from *KTU 1 6 I 43b* Waterston also reaches the same conclusion (Waterston, "The Kingdom of 'Athtar," p 361)

⁴¹ Xella, "Les pouvoirs du dieu 'Attar," p 390

⁴² *Ibid*, p 395

⁴³ *Ibid*, p 396

IV *A proposed solution to the alleged incongruities in an Ugaritic mythological provenance*

The recent scholarship on the god 'Athtar compels a reconsideration of the Ba'al-'Athtar mythology as the mythological provenance of Isa xiv 12-15. If one asserts that the elements of the episode involving Hēlēl ben-Šāhar have as their source the Ba'al-'Athtar myths, the problems rehearsed above must be resolved. I believe that resolution of all of them is possible if one jettisons the assumptions that have become part of the hermeneutical approach to these myths.

First, the work of Xella and others has demonstrated that the conventional understanding of the Ba'al-'Athtar saga as reflecting a divine belittling of a weak, dwarfish deity is no longer tenable. As noted above, 'Athtar's presumed feebleness is not the issue, for every other god would have failed to fill Ba'al's gigantic throne. There is therefore no inherent obstacle to an 'Athtar-Hēlēl ben-Šāhar equation.

Second, many scholars who have persisted in denying the Ba'al-'Athtar provenance have done so on the basis that any Ugaritic mythological provenance to the Hēlēl ben-Šāhar episode must have an El myth in view. The absolutely consistent Ba'al imagery, namely the paralleled phrases *b'yark'tē sāpôn* and *'e'le'al-bām'ōtē 'āb* of Isa xiv 13-14, argues decisively against this assumption. Scholarly resistance to seeing Ba'al mythology here and in other texts which contain the former phrase (such as Ps xlviii 1-2) has entrenched itself along two lines of argumentation, namely that the author of Isa xiv 12-15 has either fused Ba'al and El epithets, or that certain phrases in the text require an El myth as the passage's literary origin.

With respect to the first of these rejoinders, while it is true that the Hebrew Bible at times appropriates both El and Ba'al imagery and indiscriminately attributes the imagery of each deity to Yahweh, a retreat to this logic is unnecessary here. One need only make this argument if one disregards the fact that all the mythological elements in Isa xiv 12-15 have correspondences in Ba'al mythology. Put another way, the question is not whether mythological amalgamation occurs in the Hebrew Bible—it does. The question is whether this is the case in Isa xiv 12-15. In response to the second notion, that certain elements in Isa xiv 12-15 necessitate seeing El mythology here, I offer the following for consideration. The reference to the intent of Hēlēl ben-Šāhar to be above the “stars of El” and to sit upon the “mount of assembly” does not overturn my contention that the Ba'al-'Athtar

myths are the exclusive backdrop to Isa. xiv 12-15. One could rightly interpret these phrases as pointing to 'Athtar's presumed inheritance of Ba'al's position as "king of the gods," a position held by Ba'al without respect to El's position as head of the divine council.⁴⁴ As "king of the gods," Ba'al was above the "stars of El" all the while El was at the head of the pantheon.⁴⁵ Additionally, the title *'elyôn* need not point to an El myth, since it is Ba'al who is specifically referred to as "Most High" at Ugarit.⁴⁶ Lastly, the allusion to the "mount of assembly" in Isa. xiv 13 hardly demands an El provenance. It is nothing more than an assumption that this phrase refers to El's abode. As M. Smith summarized in an appendix in his recent commentary on the Ba'al Cycle, it is far from certain that the divine council actually met at El's abode.⁴⁷ It is certainly true that El dwelt on a mountain situated at the "sources of the two rivers," in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep,"⁴⁸ but where are these motifs in Isa. xiv 12-15? They must be imported from Ezek. xxviii. Hence we are dealing merely with a mountain on which a divine assembly met, a circumstance that could just as easily point to Ba'al's abode.

A third assumption that must be discarded if one is to postulate that the Ba'al-'Athtar mythology can stand on its own as the provenance of Isa. xiv 12-15 is that the Isaiah passage employs a myth that originally dealt with the usurpation of El. That *El's kingship is not the target at all should be apparent from the clear reference to Saphanu, associated only with Ba'al and not El.* The author of Isa. xiv 12-15 is not utilizing a myth that dealt with a presumed overthrow of El by Ba'al, hence the overt Ba'al motifs in his own text. The biblical author is instead employing an Ugaritic myth wherein Ba'al's throne is at issue. The Ba'al-'Athtar mythology, of course, speaks precisely to this.

⁴⁴ Mullen, *The Divine Council*, p. 41. The earlier reference to the "stars of El" makes it much more likely that the members of the divine council are being addressed and that 'Athtar is boasting that he would now be their king (although still under El). For the relationship of the kingships of El and Baal, see Mullen, *The Divine Council*, pp. 84-92.

⁴⁵ J. J. M. Roberts' conclusion, that the author of Isaiah 14:12-15 equates *Spn* with El (and so the divine council) is unnecessary. One is driven to such an equation only by insisting on an El usurpation provenance. That Ba'al in fact had his own council is evidenced in *KTU* 1.39.7, 1.41.16 (cf. the *phr b'l*). Mullen covers the concept of an "assembly of Ba'al" (Mullen, *The Divine Council*, pp. 272-73).

⁴⁶ Wyatt, "Titles of the Ugaritic Storm-God," p. 419.

⁴⁷ Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, pp. 225-34 (esp. 230-33).

⁴⁸ Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*, pp. 35-57.

But why would the author of Isa. xiv 12-15 use a myth that itself is not about the usurpation of a throne to recount a tale whose main character clearly intends to unseat his superior (recall that 'Athtar was *chosen* as a successor to Ba'al)? It is at this point that I believe Page's observations are critical. The Ba'al imagery behind Isa. xiv 12-15 is undeniable, yet the Ba'al-'Athtar episode, as conventionally understood, yields no reason for the author of Isa. xiv 12-15 to have drawn from it for his accusational taunt against the king of Babylon's pride. I believe, with current scholarship, that the goal of the author of the text was not to highlight a usurpation of any throne on the part of either Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar or the king of Babylon. Rather, this author sought to emphasize the *arrogance* of these figures. I believe the Ba'al-'Athtar tale fits this perfectly, for it describes a striking act of insolence.

Prior to being offered Ba'al's kingship, 'Athtar had complained about not having his own house. He is subsequently selected by El and Athirat for rulership, a decision prompted by reasons of their own, not to pacify 'Athtar. To be sure, none of the gods could adequately replace Ba'al, but 'Athtar, the first-born of El, was deemed the best viable option. That the throne was his if he wanted it is apparent from the fact that there was no campaign to recall him even after he could not fill Ba'al's throne. Rather than comply with El's wishes, 'Athtar had the audacity to despise the position given to him once he had "tried it out." This behavior was consistent, for 'Athtar had previously challenged El's decrees.⁴⁹ I believe that this haughty snubbing of El's decree, an event Mullen calls "startling,"⁵⁰ served as the ideal example for the author of Isa. xiv taunt song to portray the arrogance of the king of Babylon. Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar (and so 'Athtar) wanted to be like the Most High *not* in terms of usurping a position, *but in his desire for decretive control*.

The fourth and final presumed obstacle to a Ba'al-'Athtar provenance concerns the dramatically divergent fates of 'Athtar and Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar. After snubbing the kingship decreed by El, the Ugaritic myth informs the reader that 'Athtar descended from Ba'al's throne and "became king over the earth (*ʿars*), god of all of it."⁵¹ Isa. xiv 15 concludes, however, that Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar was cast down to *š'ol*.⁵²

⁴⁹ KTU 1 2 III 15-24, see footnote 35 as well

⁵⁰ Mullen, *The Divine Council*, p. 37, note 65

¹ KTU 1 6 I 63-64

² The verb form is the Hiphil of *yrd*

While ‘Athtar subsumed the dominion of the *’ars* for a time prior to Ba‘al’s resurrection, Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar’s fate was completely punitive.

Those familiar with the Ba‘al cycle recall that one of Ba‘al’s titles was “lord of the *’ars*” before his demise at the hands of Mot.⁵³ Equally familiar is the fact that the Ugaritic word *’ars* can be used of the Underworld.⁵⁴ For example, one text reads that Ba‘al “fell to the Underworld (*’ars*); Aliyan Ba‘al has died.”⁵⁵ In his contribution to the D. N. Freedman Festschrift, Lawrence Toombs persuasively argued that “control of the *’ars* is the prize of war in the Ba‘al epic.”⁵⁶ In an attempt to understand the significance of Ba‘al title “lord of the Earth/*’ars*,” Toombs notes that:

The cultures of the ancient Near East conceived of the universe as a tripartite structure, consisting of heaven, the abode of the gods; earth, the sphere of human activity; and the underworld, the abode of the dead and of the deities who presided over their attenuated existence. The cosmology of the Ba‘al epic diverges from this general picture in that the universe is quadripartite. Its upper level, corresponding to heaven, is the “heights of the north” (*mrym spn*). Its basement is the underworld (*qrt mt*). The middle stage is divided between *ym* (sea) and *’ars* (earth) . . . Baal possesses the power of the rain, so necessary in maintaining the life of the communities along the eastern Mediterranean coast . . . To a land-based people with an agricultural economy the *’ars*, the land on which the crops grow, the animals live, and the cities of men are built, is the vital sector of the middle tier . . . The central theme of the Baal epic may be seen as a segment of a cosmogony, dealing with the divine power structure which controls, not the universe as a whole, but the inhabited earth.⁵⁷

Viewed against this backdrop, the Ba‘al cycle depicts a bid for power over the earth first between Ba‘al and Yam/Nahar, and then between Ba‘al and Mot. The former conflict focuses on Yam’s unwillingness to have his sphere of influence restricted to the oceans and rivers. Victory over Ba‘al would mean the overwhelming of Ba‘al’s realm of the *’ars*

⁵³ KTU 1.3.13-4

⁵⁴ Mark S. Smith, “Baal in the Land of Death,” *UF* 17 (1986), p. 312

⁵⁵ KTU 1.5.VI.8-10

⁵⁶ Lawrence E. Toombs, “Baal, Lord of the Earth: The Ugaritic Baal Epic,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essay in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O’Connor, Winona Lake, Ind., 1983), p. 618

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 617-618

by the waters, thus ruining the fertile, arable earth. As Toombs notes, "Yam's defeat insured that there would be a dry land on which human communities could subsist."⁵⁸ The subsequent conflict involved Ba'al becoming the challenger and his aspirations for "universal" rule. A paradise would surely have resulted were Ba'al to have conquered Death/Mot, but this was not to be. Mot prevailed over Ba'al, but Ba'al rose from the dead, producing a draw between the two combatants. Periodically, then, "Ba'al must yield his lordship to Mot, and in a cyclical pattern."⁵⁹

But should the 'ars that became 'Athtar's realm after his descent be considered the Underworld? Ba'al and Mot were "co-regents" of the 'ars, but, as the preceding summary indicates, the 'ars over which the co-regency is held is not the Underworld. Hence one cannot argue that when 'Athtar briefly became king over the 'ars before Ba'al's resurrection, that realm was the Underworld.⁶⁰ Other data against defining 'ars as the Underworld in the Ba'al-'Athtar myth include the observation that Ba'al is not said to have undertaken rulership of the Underworld during his trip there, and the clear textual evidence that Mot, not 'Athtar, was the lord of the Underworld, a status he never relinquished.⁶¹ Although some scholars have sought to equate 'Athtar and Mot at this point, the former being the hypostasis of the latter, this equation is disputed.⁶² It makes more sense to see the realm 'Athtar took for himself after his defiant rejection of Ba'al's position over the other gods as the earth.⁶³ All of this does not explain why the author of Isa. xiv consigns Hēlēl ben-Šāḥar to the Underworld, though.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p 618

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 618-619

⁶⁰ The epic does not tell us what happened to 'Athtar after Ba'al returned from the Underworld, but Ba'al's resurrection effectively eliminates the need for a replacement

⁶¹ Waterston, "The Kingdom of 'Athtar," p 361

⁶² *Ibid.*, p 361, N Wyatt, "'Attar and the Devil," *TGUOS* 25 (1973-74), pp 87-89

⁶³ Waterston ("The Kingdom of 'Athtar," p 357) also believes that 'Athtar's kingdom is the earth, the world of humankind, but also contends that 'Athtar ruled over this same realm before his descent from the throne of Ba'al, but offers nothing in the way of specific textual statements to that effect. His position is, rather, based on his speculation as to how the tiered Ugaritic universe might be understood. I see no compelling reason that 'Athtar remained king over the earth after Ba'al's resurrection, since Ba'al's rising would have been seen as his new, although periodic, rulership over the earth. There is also no reason (other than Waterston's interesting speculation) that 'Athtar ruled over the earth before his descent. This would seem odd in view of the facts that Ba'al is clearly responsible for the maintenance of the earth due to his status as the rain god, and that he lacks a palace, a detail Waterston, by his own

My proposed solution to this last point of alleged incongruence between the Ba'al-'Athtar myth and Isa. xiv is that the author of the latter, familiar as he was with the Ugaritic religious texts, also knew that in the Ugaritic language, 'ars could refer to either the earth or the Underworld. But rather than have Hēlēl ben-Šāhar snub the Most High and then get to choose to rule over the earth with impunity, the theology of the author of Isa. xiv 12-15 mandated a disastrous end for the rebel: an abrupt and permanent expulsion to the realm of the dead. No one—god or man—could show such contempt for the sovereignty of the Most High. This wordplay would be quite consistent with the kind of polemical applications drawn from ancient near eastern texts by the authors and redactors of the Hebrew Bible widely recognized elsewhere.⁶⁴

V. Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the reason of why a mythological provenance for Isa. xiv 12-15 has not been successfully located within Ugaritic religious literature is because several important

admission, cannot explain ("The Kingdom of 'Athtar," p 360) Even if Waterston's speculation is correct, 'Athtar's act in the descent from the throne would still reflect the kind of hubris sought by the author of Isaiah xiv, for it would still amount to snubbing the wish of El Perhaps the designation of 'Athtar as "possessor of kingship" in *KTU* 1 2 III calls to reference the title he earned after the descent, making the episode of the descent from the throne etiological This, however, would certainly require that 'Athtar retained control of the earth after the resurrection of Ba'al Ultimately, the question is beyond the scope of this paper

⁶⁴ The polemic use of Ba'al language and motifs is common in the Hebrew Bible For general summations, see N C Habel, *Yahweh versus Baal* (New York, 1964), and R Chisholm, "The Polemic Against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature," *BSac* 151 603 (Jul-Sept 1994), pp 267-83 Scholars have long recognized this technique in I Kings xvii-xix, the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Carmel See, for example, F C Fensham, "A Few Observations on the Polarisation between Yahweh and Baal in I Kings 17-19," *ZAW* 92 (1980), pp 227-36, G E Saint-Laurent, "Light from Ras Shamra on Elijah's Ordeal upon Mount Carmel," in *Scripture in Context Essays on the Comparative Method* (ed C D Evans, W W Hallo, and J B White, Pittsburgh, 1980), pp 123-39, and James R Battenfield, "YHWH's Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration Essays in Honor of Roland K Harrison* (ed A Gileadi, Grand Rapids, 1988), pp 19-37 Psalm xxix and Exodus xv also contain such polemic material (see, respectively, A H W Curtis, "The 'Subjugation of the Waters' Motif in the Psalms Imagery or Polemic?" *JSS* 23 [1978], pp 245-56, and F M Cross, "The Divine Warrior in Israel's Early Cult," in *Biblical Motifs Origins and Transformations* [ed A Altmann, Cambridge, Mass., 1966], pp 22-23)

elements of the Ba'al cycle have been misinterpreted as the result of hermeneutical assumptions brought to these texts. Contrary to the conventional consensus, I believe that when these assumptions are held in check and the details of that text are carefully observed and permitted to speak, all the elements of the taunt-song can be correlated with the Ba'al-'Athtar myth.

Abstract

Many scholars of the Hebrew Bible have postulated that the source of the taunt-song of Isa xiv 12-15 is to be found in Ugaritic religious literature. Many of these scholars believe that the passage contains elements of both El and Ba'al myths, an assumption that leads them to discount the proposition that all the mythological strands of Isa xiv 12-15 can be correlated with a single Ugaritic myth. Still others contend that only a single myth concerning the usurpation of El can account for all of the mythological features. This article disputes both of these positions, arguing that no usurpation of El is in view, and that the mythological provenance of Isa xiv 12-15 can be entirely correlated with the Ba'al-'Athtar myth.