**Word Commentary on Isa 14.12-15**

(This Commentary gives varies antient myths that some have applied to the passage down through the ages)

**12–15** *The Fall of Helel*. As v 8 seems to pick up themes of an ancient myth of God’s forest in Lebanon, so this section seems to be based on another such myth. A possible summary of the story would be: Helel son of Shachar (or “Shining One, Son of Dawn”) was a great hero who determined to make himself the equal of a god, El Elyon (or “the Most High”). His ambition was to raise himself above the clouds, above all the stars of god, to the very mountain in the farthest north where gods gather, there to reign as king over the universe, including the gods. But the conclusion of this ill-advised ambition was his precipitous fall into Sheol, perhaps after a battle with El Elyon himself. It is generally thought that this story must have come from a culture outside Israel, but as yet no such myth has been found in Canaan or among other peoples. The taunt in vv 12–15 has “historicized the motif and poetically related it to the fallen tyrant” (cf. A. Ohler, *Mythologische Elemente im Alten Testament* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969] 175–77).

The passage begins with the usual *qinah* opening: איך, “How!” But the next phrase, “from heaven,” sets the one being addressed apart from ordinary mortals. This is further demonstrated by the comparison with Helel son of Shachar. הילל, “Helel,” is unknown in the ot. lxx translates the entire name ἑωσφόρος ὁ πρωὶ ἀνατέλλων, “Eosphoros (Morning Star), who makes the morning rise.” Vg. has *Lucifer, qui mane oriebaris*, “Lucifer, you who made the morning rise.”

שׁחר, “Shachar,” is known as a god’s name. In the ot, Ps 139:9 speaks of his “wings”; Job 3:9; 41:18, “his eyelashes” or “rays.” Other references (Song 6:10; Pss 57:9; 108:3; 110:3) show personalized poetic views of the dawn that may reflect such an idea. Phoenician theophoric names carry the name ברשחר, שחרבעל, as does 1 Chr 7:10: אחישׁחר *Achishachar*, “my brother is Shachar” (cf. R. de Vaux, “Le Textes de Ras Shamra et l’Ancien Testament,” *RB* 46 [1937] 547 n. 3). A Ugaritic text (“Shachar and Shalem”) portrays El’s fathering Shachar and also his birth by one of El’s wives. He is seen as parallel to Shalem, the god of twilight. In Ugarit, Shahar is also found in personal names (cf. Stolz, *ZAW* 84 [1972] 182 n. 10). Some interpreters would change שׁ to שׂ because in other Semitic languages שׂחר means the moon god, called “Newmoon, son of (old) moon.” Wildberger calls this nonsense when applied to “the son of dawn.”

הילל, “Helel,” is much more difficult to trace (cf. McKay, *VT* 20 [1970] 450–64; Craigie, *ZAW* 85 [1973] 223–25). Arabic *hilâlun*, “new moon,” has led many to translate this Hebrew word as “New Moon” (GB, KBL, *BHS*, *HAL*). N. A. Koenig thought of it as the waning moon. Wildberger points to the Hebrew root הלל, “to shine” (BDB, 237), and relates it to Akkadian usage to show that it is an epithet for a god, not a name. Grelot (“Isaïe XIV 12–15 et son arriere-plan mythologique,” *RHR* 149 [1956] 18–49) and McKay have picked up Duhm’s suggestion (1922) of a connection with the Greek myth of Phaethon (Φαέθων). The name was used for one of the horses that pulled the chariot of Eos (Homer, *Odyssey* 23.245). The name in other places may refer to the sun or to the son of Helios since it, like הלל, means “shining.” Hesiod (*Theogony* 986) calls Phaethon the son of Eos, the star Venus. In *Theogony* 378, Hesiod reports that Eos gave birth to the morningstar ἑωσφόρος, also called φωσφόρος, or Lucifer. Grelot concludes that Helel, son of Shahar, is the same divinity known as Phaethon, son of Eos. The other Phaethon, son of Helios and Klymene, was reported in his ambitious daring to have tried to drive his father’s chariot, the sun, with its horses of fire, through the clouds. This exceeded his abilities so that Zeus was forced to intervene to prevent a universal catastrophe. By a lightning bolt he made Phaethon crash to earth (McKay, *VT* 20 [1970] 450–64; Grelot, *RHR* 149 [1956] 30–32). If this story were transferred to the other Phaethon, the parallel to Isa 14:12–15 would be apparent. McKay pursues a similar suggestion. But Wildberger (552) and Craigie have warned against using the Greek parallels. Too many differences appear between the Greek and Canaanite mythologies. Craigie supports Albright (*Archaelogy and the Religion of Israel* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1942] 84, 86) and Oldenburg (“Above the Stars of El: El in Ancient Arabic Religion,” *ZAW* 82 [1970] 199) in noting that *˓Aṯtar* had the epithet “the Luminous” (J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, 2d ed. [Leiden: Brill, 1965] 66). Thus the Canaanite background is more credible than the Greek.

Whatever the myth might have said, the text in Isaiah tells of a tyrant king who is overcome, not by the resistance of a god but by his own ambition to be as high as a god, to “ascend to heaven,” to reign above the stars, to sit in “the mountain assembly,” and to be “like the Most High.” Three locations for the Most High, or Elyon, are given. In Canaanite mythology El’s dwelling was above the stars, in heaven. The ot speaks of אל השמעים, “El of the heavens” (Ps 136:26; Lam 3:41). In Jerusalem God is commonly understood to dwell in heaven and look down on earth (Isa 18:4; Ps 14:2). “The mountain assembly” is located “in the farthest north.” It appears in this context as a synonym for “heavens.” The same combination occurs in Greek thought (E. Oberhummer, PW 18.1 [1939] 277–79). The idea of a mountain assembly for the gods was widespread in the area. It was regularly understood to be “in the farthest north,” whether this be spoken in Mesopotamia, in Canaan, or in Greece. Ps 48:3 (2) likens Zion, YHWH’s holy mountain, to צפון, “the north.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Watts, J. D. W. (2005). [*Isaiah 1–33*](https://ref.ly/logosres/wbc24rev?ref=BibleBHS.Is14.9-11&off=2762) (Revised Edition, Vol. 24, pp. 264–265). Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)