Miszellen

ḥôlēš ʿal in Isaiah 14:12: A New Proposal

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In Isa 14:3b–21, 14:12 remains a *crux interpretum* both in terms of mythological antecedents and the meaning of ḥôlēš ʿal gôyîm: the latter's problem seems to hinge upon the interpretation of ḥôlēš, qal participle, as transitive or intransitive and the precise function of ʿal in the complete phrase. Interpretation has, hitherto, involved emendation or circumlocution. This paper will attempt to show that, as it stands in MT, the phrase is grammatically sound, capable of direct interpretation and crafted by the writer to create a vivid and precise image.

First of all, the exact meaning of ḥlš must be determined. The word is used five times in the Hebrew Scriptures; twice in nominal form, Ex 32:18; Joel 4:10 (adjective *qua* substantive), and thrice as a verb, Ex 17:13; Is 14:12; Job 14:10. Its primary meaning appears to be that of „weak" or „weaken"[1]. However, J. Barr's warning against over-confidence in a high degree of lexical overlap should not be ignored[2]. He also indicates that it is a good rule to interpret by observation of the context, except where one liguistic element is obscure[3]. Observance of this rule in the case of ḥlš will demonstrate that its semantic field can be narrowed.

Ex 17:8–13 describes a battle between Israel and Amalek at Rephidim. Israelite victory depended upon Moses' ability to hold his magic staff high over the battlefield. Sustained by Aaron and Hur he allowed the Israelites, led by Joshua, to prevail, wayyaḥᵃlōš yᵉhôšuᵃ ʿ ʾet-ᵃmālēq wᵉʾet-ʿammô lᵉpîḥāreb, „and Joshua mowed down the Amalekites with the edge of the sword" (v 13). In light of what follows, wayyākēm (BHS) is unnecessary. R. C. van Leeuwen's translation „and Joshua weakened Amalek (and his troops with the sword)", is tailored to suit the lexical overlap, rather than designed to capture the sense of MT[4]. To translate the contrasting gābar as a stative, „was strong", is inappropriate. The word must reflect the surging to and fro of the combatants. That the Amalekites lived to fight another day and were, therefore, defeated rather than annihilated does not detract from the clear statement that they were cut down by Joshua and his swordsmen. Both LXX and Vg support this interpretation: the former ἐν φόνῳ μαχαίρας, lit. „by slaughter of the sword", and the latter *in ore gladii*, „by the edge of the sword". LXX ἐτρέψατο, „defeated", and Vg *fugavit,* „put to flight", indicate

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[1] BDB, 325; KBL³, 311, ḥlš (1).

[2] J. Barr, Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament (Oxford, 1986), 187.

[3] *Ibid.,* 282.

[4] R. C. van Leeuwen, „Isa 14.12 ḥôlēš ʿal gôyim and Gilgamesh XI, 6", JBL 99/2 (1980), 175; following G. B. Gray, Job II (ICC, New York, 1921), 90; B. S Childs, Exodus (London, 1974), 310–311, also translates „disabled Amalek . . . . . with the edge of the sword". If „weaken" was all that was intended, it seems that ḥlh (KBL³, 304, „wound, weaken, disable") would have been used rather than the more rare ḥlš.

something stronger than mere weakening. Thus in this case ḥlš is transitive and specifically means „to wield the sword with the intent of cutting down".

In Joel 4:10 ḥlš occurs substantively but within a military sphere of reference. The gibbôrîm (v 9), again the contrast with ḥlš is worth noting, are the warriors, those who wield sword and spear. The meaning of haḥallāš here does approximate most closely to weakness cf. LXX ἀδύνατος and Vg infirmus. However the context allows the interpretation of weak as cowardly; one who fears being cut down by sword or spear. He is exhorted to make his own. The ḥallāš becomes a geber by fashioning and wielding a sword. In Ex 32:18 the qôl ʿᵃnôt hᵃlûšāh is the lamentation that follows upon military defeat. Contrasted, once more, with gᵉbûrāh, the noun points to the harsh realities of defeat which trigger the grief – not just a feeling of weakness as opposed to strength.

Job 14:7–10 compares a man who dies in the prime of life, geber, to a tree that is cut down, yikārēt. He dies, yāmût, and yeḥᵉlāš; the latter occasioning some difficulty. Bearing in mind that wᵉyeḥᵉlāš likely denotes a continuing condition, a question must be raised as to its nature[5]. As Gray indicated, if the world is simply translated „weaken" that is an inappropriate sequel to yāmût[6]. Death does not merely disable, it terminates. Nor does the word refer to the impotent condition of the deceased in the underworld. In fact, in Job 14:10 the word used for that is ḥlh. Gray rightly notes that LXX ἀνὴρ δὲ τελευτήσας ᾤχετο, „a man is dead and gone", reflects the swiftness and irrevocability of death's action. But there is no basis in the text for the emendations he proposes or communicates yahᵃlōk, „is gone", or yaḥᵃlōp, „passes away"[7]. I. Eitan also comments that wᵉyeḥᵉlāš is anti-climatic after yāmût. He links the word to classical Arabic ḥalasa, „carry off, seize" (Palestinian vernacular ḥalaša, „reap"). So he translates, „a man dies and is snatched away", „reaped" by death.[8] However, ḥlš can be satisfactorily explained from the context. Even in this non-military sphere, it cannot be totally divorced from the idea of cutting down. The man, like the tree, is cut down by death and remains fallen; the action and the continuing state mediated by the same verb performing a dual function.

To summarise, in the three instances where ḥlš appears in a military context, its general sense of „weak" may be restricted to the activity involved in wielding the sword, its intent and its aftermath. In Job 14:10 the verb, though intransitive, is still tied closely to the notion of cutting down or felling. It is certainly not without significance that ḥlš is used rather than the more common ḥlh which can express wounding and its consequences (cf. II Chron 24:25; 35:23) and the state of the dead in the underworld, cf. above.

In Isa 14:12 scholars and translators are almost equally divided between transitive and intransitive. Those who favor the transitive include F. Delitzsch, „who threw the nations down from above," J. Ridderbos, „gij overwinnaar over

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[5] GKC, 329: § 111t.

[6] Gray, op. cit., 90.

[7] Ibid., 90.

[8] I. Eitan, „Two Unknown Verbs", JBL 42 (1923), 25–28; his analogy breaks down when he applies it to Ex 17:13 where Joshua can hardly be said to have „snatched away/reaped" Amalek by the sword and in Isa 14:12 „reaper of nations" is not apt and ignores ʿal.

de natiën", E. König, „du Niederstrecker von Nationen," G. A. Smith, „hurtler at nations!" O. Kaiser, „Völkerbezwinger", R. E. Clements, B. Gosse[9]. Although the evidence of the versions points to perplexity over MT, the phrase is understood transitively[10]. The RSV English translation also reflects the transitive, as does Jerusalem Bible, „you who enslaved the nations" – despite its idiosyncratic rendering. An intransitive sense is adopted by G. B. Gray, J. Fischer, J. W. McKay, „weakling above the nations", J. H. Oswald, „weak upon the nations"[11]. The New English Bible, „sprawling helpless across the nations," similarly evinces the intransitive. But if *ḥlš* only means „weaken" or „disable", then the intransitive in *ḥôlēš 'al gôyîm* produces translations which are forced and inept. Those translations of McKay, Oswald and NEB, noted above, are examples of this. NEB stretches to finding the improbable sense of „across" in *'al*.

Those who recognise this difficulty, but wish to retain the intransitive are, thus, forced to emend the remainder of the phrase. One of the earliest of the emendations derives from H. Gunkel who altered *'al gôyîm*, „upon the nations", to *'al gᵉwîyyôt*, „upon the corpses", (cf. Fischer, „sankest nieder auf Leichen", and Gray)[12]. A more ingenious solution offered by R. C. van Leeuwen is *'al gᵉwî(m)*, „upon (your) back"[13]. This certainly involves no alteration of the consonantal text, but it is based on a misunderstanding of the imagery and parallelism in v 12. His argument that the scroll 1QIsaᵃ (*ḥwlš 'l gwy*) reflects an original MT reading of „back" – MT with enclitic *m* – is suspect. The missing *m* in 1QIsaᵃ can be more probably attributed to scribal error. The evidence of LXX ἔθνη and Vg *gentes* cannot be so easily set aside. The adoption of the intransitive forces unnecessary emendation.

The transitive of *ḥlš* accords better with the imagery of the poem as a whole and the parallelism in 12. The king of Babylon is portrayed as one who *makkēh 'ammîm bᵉ'ebrāh makkat biltî sārāh*, „struck the peoples in fury with endless blow (V 6)", who chopped down the cedars of Lebanon (v 8). He is the one who dominates by striking, trampling and cutting down. These, however, become his fate. In v 12b *'ēk (BHS) nigda'tā lā'āreṣ*, „how your are cut down to the ground" – there is no connotation of „underworld" here. The poet distinguished very clearly between the *'ereṣ* as the scene of the tyrant's this-worldly activities and *šᵉ'ôl* as his other-worldly destination after he is toppled.

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[9] F. Delitzsch, The Prophecies of Isaiah (Edinburgh, 1890), 309–310; J. Ridderboos, De Profeet Jesaja I (Kampen, 1922), 93; E. König, Das Buch Jesaja (Gütersloh, 1926), 181; G. A. Smith, Isaiah 1–39 (New York, 1927), 434; O. Kaiser, Der Prophet Jesaja: Kapitel 13–39 (Göttingen, 1973), 26; R. E. Clements, Isaiah 1–39 (Grand Rapids, 1980), 142; B. Gosse, Isaïe 13,1–14,23 (Göttingen, 1988), 220.

[10] LXX ἀποστέλλων formed by metathesis of h and s is, however, transitive; cf. also Symmachus τιτρώσκων „wound" and Theodotion ἀσθενείας παρέχων „cause weakness"; a solitary support for *ḥlš* as week, possibly influenced by Aramaic.

[11] G. B. Gray, Isaiah (ICC, New York, 1912), 256; J. Fischer, Das Buch Isaias 1–39 (Bonn, 1937), 120; J. W. McKay, „Helel and the Dawn Goddess", VT 20 (1970), 453–454; J. H. Oswald, The Book of Isaiah 1–39 (Grand Rapids, 1988), 316, 322.

[12] Fischer, *op.cit.* 120; Gray, *op.cit.*, 90.

[13] Van Leeuwen, *op.cit.*, 178–179.

The parallelism proposed for v 12 by Leeuwen and others, part synonymous, part antithetical, does not accord with the tenor of the whole taunt-song, nor, thus, with the intent of the verse[14]. The *hubris* of the king is portrayed in a series of arresting images designed to make the contrast with his fall all the more sharp; and v 12 follows this pattern by its use of synonymous parallelism low/high // low/high. The parallelism of *šāmayim* and *'ereṣ* cannot be antithetical because of the prepositions preceding them *min* and *l^e*: „from heaven have you fallen" implies destination earth already reached, matched by „to the ground" in the second hemistich.

Hll bn šḥr and *ḥlš 'l gwym* are not epithets of weakness. They describe the living monarch and they are intended to evoke the despotic grandeur which cowed the nations. Since this poem celebrates his downfall, there is a hint of irony in their use, but that is not their chief function. This ruler who caused the earth to shake (V 16b) is mocked after the fact of his death. In life his brilliant career caused him to rise above the nations like *hll bn šḥr*. Like the star he fell, but for very different reasons.

It is unwise to press the analogy between the king of Babylon and Helel too far. Despite considerable scholarly investigation the mythological background to Is 14:12–15 remains resolutely obscure[15]. It is best to envisage it as a collection of fragmentary mythological references employed to illustrate the overweening *hubris* of the despot. Helel is the bright morning-star who falls from heaven. However, there is no evidence that, like the king of Babylon, his fall was a punishment, that he was banished to the underworld or that he oppressed the nations. As the herald and son of dawn, his fall may be interpreted as making way for his mother[16]. The glittering monarch who rose above the world, *hll bn šḥr*, falls, the despot described as *ḥlš 'l gwym*, is himself cut down. The transitive use of *ḥlš* is borne out by the context of the whole taunt-song, the parallelism and the sense of the verse itself.

Unfortunately, this seems to be immediately invalidated by the obstinate presence of *'al*. The history of its interpretation beginning with LXX reflects the disquiet that is has caused translators and commentators. Even those who prefer the transitive of *ḥlš* produce some remarkably ingenious, uneven or evasive translations. Delitzsch's „who threw down the nations from above" derives from the baleful *influxus siderum* which Helel, as star, exercises[17]. Smith's „hurtler at nations" prefigures Gosse's view that „ *'al* peut avoir une valeur adversative" by some fifty years[18]. König, Kaiser, Clements JB and RSV simply ignore it.

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[14]   *Ibid.*, 177–178.

[15]   Studies include: P. Grelot, „Isaïe xiv et son arrière-plan mythologique", RHR 149–150 (1956), 20ff.; McKay see above n.11; P. C. Craigie, „Helel, Athtar and Phaethon", ZAW 85 (1973), 223–225; D. V. Etz, „Is Isaiah xiv 12–15 a reference to Comet Halley?" VT 36 (1986), 289–301; D. E. Gowan, „When Man Becomes God" (Pittsburgh, 1975), 45–67; W. S. Prinsloo, „Isaiah 14:12–15, Humiliation, Hubris, Humiliation", ZAW 93 (1981), 432–438; B. Gosse, see above n. 9.

[16]   McKay, *op.cit.*, 456–460; in Ovid's „Metamorphoses" Lucifer, as chief sentry, leaves his post in the sky last as dawn approaches, *diffugiunt stellae, quarum agmina cogit | Lucifer et caeli statione novissimus exit,* F. T. Miller (tr.), (Harvard, 1971), 68, lines 114–115.

[17]   Delitzsch, *op.cit.*, 310.

[18]   Smith, *op.cit.*, 434.

Emending *ʿal* to *kol* (BHS from LXX) fails to take account of the confused signals from LXX and the ἐπ᾽ of Symmachus and Theodotion. The primary meaning of *ʿal* is „over, above, upon"[19].

The following proposal offers a way out of this grammatical impasse. Bearing in mind that the king of Babylon strikes and hews down aggressively and that *ḥlš* never strays far from the idea of cutting down, the sword and the warrior, *ḥôlēš*, qal participle, can be construed as „one cutting down" > „sword-wielder" > „warrior". This makes good sense in the context. The construction is possible on the analogy of *šōpēṭ*, „judge", *šōpēr*, „scribe" and *rōpēʾ*, „physician". These are, admittedly, more common; but, given the very specific uses of *ḥlš* elsewhere, there is no reason to suppose that its use is any less exact here. The king is not an ordinary warrior, he is the warrior *par excellence* who is permitted by Yahweh to exercise temporary dominion *over* the nations.

A tentative translation, for purposes of argument, might be „warrior over the nations." The avoids the necessity for a direct object when the qal participle is rendered transitively *simpliciter*. The preposition *ʿal,* with its sense of „over" and „above", can be used to express the psychological aspects of political and military domination in special circumstances. In Ex 1:8 *wayyāqom melek-ḥādāš ʿal miṣrayim,* „there arose a new king *over* Egypt," as opposed to *melek miṣrayim* (Ex 1:25,17; 2:23), hints at the ruthless exercise of absolute power that is soon to come. Saul is anointed *lᵉmelek ʿal yisrāʾēl,* „as king *over* Israel" (cf. II Sam 2:4; 12:7), given authority over the factious tribes that he has to unite in a divinely-appointed mission. This is how *ʿal* functions in *ḥlš ʾl gwym,* the warrior-king exerts his tyranny over the nations.

This tyranny is temporary. The king of Babylon does not vanquish the nations completely, *contra* Ridderbos. The verb *ḥlš* indicates the passing nature of his triumphs. The phrase is used to evoke the image of the supreme warrior or warlord who rises over the nations like a sword-wielding colossus to batter them into submission[20]. *ḥlš*, carefully chosen, is heavy with meaning which makes its translation into any language fraught with difficulty. It may be that we have to understand a verb that would convey the sense of „rises" or „towers" over, which would alleviate the cryptic nature of the phrase, but destroy the perfect symmetry and parallelism of the verse:

ʾēk nāpaltā miššāmayim hêlēl ben-šāḥar
(ʾēk) nigdaʿtā lāʾāreṣ ḥôlēš ʿal gôyîm

„How you have fallen from heaven, Bright One, Dawn's Son;
How you are felled to the ground, warrior over the nations."

Helel soars in shining splendor into the sky and falls. The king of Babylon towers over the nations in battle-array, but he is cut down to earth by Yahweh, the ultimate warrior.

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[19] BDB, 752; BLe, 640; KBL², 703; S. Moscati, Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages" (Wiesbaden, 1969) 121.

[20] Shakespeare draws a similar picture in „Julius Caesar" (I. ii. 134–135):
„Why , man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus; and we petty men
walk under his huge legs . . . ".

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Abstract

In Isa 14:12 *hôlēš 'al gôyîm* remains a *crux interpretum*. Attempts to interpret *hôlēš 'al* satisfactorily have, hitherto, involved emendation or circumlocution. This paper establishes that, in its five occurrences in the Hebrew Scriptures, the semantic field of *ḥlš* can be narrowed to the notion of cutting down or the action of wielding the sword, its intent and aftermath. It is shown that construing *hôlēš*, qal participle, as transitive accords best with the imagery of the entire poem (3b–21) and the parallelism in v 12. The obstinate presence of *'al* is resolved by taking it as an expression of the psychological aspects of political and military domination. *hôlēš* is then translated as „warrior" (cf. *šōpēr*, „scribe") and the phrase „warrior over the nations" is interpreted as evoking the image of the supreme warrior towering over his conquests.

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