ISAIAH XIV 4B-23: IRONIC REVERSAL THROUGH CONCENTRIC STRUCTURE AND MYTHIC ALLUSION

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The poem of Isa. xiv 4b-23 consists primarily of qînāh-meter (3+2). Based on conventional usage of this “dirge” meter in funerary lament forms and its combination here with the sardonic tone of a māšāl genre the poem jeers with all the irony one would expect of a funerary taunt song. But there is more.

Concentric Structure in Isa. xiv 4b-23

On the basis of the appearance of demarcating framing elements (i.e., the formulaic introduction in xiv 4a and the formulaic Yahwistic ascription in xiv 22b, d, and 23d) Isa. xiv 4b-21 might seem to comprise a single poetic unit. However, the overall concentric structure of the poem favors including verses 22-3 in the unit. This concentric structure may be outlined as follows:

A “YHWH” shatters his foes (4b-5) ικ
B Domination of the Oppressed (6)
   C “The whole land is at rest and peace” (7)
   D “Pine trees” and “Cedars of Lebanon:”
      “No woodsman comes to cut us down” (8)

1 My thanks to Robert B. Chisholm, Jr, for his helpful comments upon reading this article.
E The startled reaction of “all the kings of the nations” [emphasis on their activity] (9)

F Sarcastic quotation of deceased kings [emphasis on his stasis] (10)

G “All your pomp has been brought down to the grave” (11)

AXIS¹: Sardonic Celestial Pseudo-epithets $\gamma k$
[2 vbs; emphasis on descent] (12)

AXIS²: 7-fold Arrogant Assault on the Cosmic Mountain [anacrusis + 5 vbs in 7 cola; emphasis on ascent] (13-14)

G’ “You are brought down to the grave” (15)

F’ Sarcastic quotation of deceased kings [emphasis on his (former) activity] (16-17)

E’ The secure state of “all the kings of the nations” [emphasis on their stasis] (18)

D’ “You are...like a rejected branch”; “covered with...those pierced by the sword” (19a-e)

C’ “You have destroyed your [own] land” (19f-20c)

B’ Domination of the Oppressors (20d-21)

A’ “$y^h w^h$ $s^b w^t$” shatters his foes
[3-fold ascription to YHWH with $y^h w^h$ $s^b w^t$ as a frame] (22-3)

Despite the prevalence of strophic analyses of this poem its overall structure is actually concentric.³ A sevenfold arrogation of

³ For variations on the view that the poem is strophic we have: (a) the poem is comprised of five seven-line strophes: so Vanderburgh (n. 2), pp. 111-21; A. Dupont-Sommer, Revue de l’histoire des religions 134 (1947-48), p. 72; (b) the poem is comprised of three seven-line strophes, a nine-line strophe and a three-line strophe: so Quell (n. 2), pp. 145-55; (c) the poem is comprised of four seven-line strophes and a five-line strophe: so van Wyk (n. 2), pp. 240, 244. Still subscribing to the view that the poem has a strophic pattern, yet more sensitive to its concentric structure, are the treatments by van Wyk and Luis Alonso Schökel, “Traduc-