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The North (šāpôn) in the Book of Jeremiah

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The »foe from the north« is a well-known trope in the book of Jeremiah, especially associated with chs. 4–6. It was last subject to sustained discussion by David Reimer, in 1989, who argued in this journal that this enemy should be understood as a non-specific but earthly enemy, with mythical overtones deriving from the location of YHWH's divine abode on Mount Zaphon/Şaphon.¹ Two elements of existing scholarship exerted significant influence on Reimer's discussion and are reflected in his work and in subsequent remarks on the »foe from the north« in commentaries on Jeremiah. The following seeks to examine these presuppositions, reconsider the evidence for the interpretation of this enemy and its description as originating in the north, and ultimately to argue that the enemy is described as from the north as a straightforwardly geographical matter and should be identified with the Babylonians.

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First and partially precipitating the attention given to this anonymous enemy was a long-standing debate over when a seventh-sixth century prophet called Jeremiah identified the Babylonian Empire as the agent of YHWH's coming judgment on Judah.² This was closely linked to questions about the relationship between Jeremiah's expectations concerning this enemy and the tribes of Scythians purported to have been marauding over the Levant in the last quarter of the seventh century. A reference in Herodotus's *Histories* (1.103–6) had given rise to the suggestion that these Anatolian warriors might have been the enemy from the north first envisaged by Jeremiah, only to be later and in light of subsequent events supplanted by the Babylonians. In the wake of Richard Vaggione's decisive defeat of this Scythian hypothesis, however, it was increasingly imperative to identify an alternative enemy in Jeremiah's mind, to fill the gap between Jeremiah's first warnings about

1 David J. Reimer, »The »Foe« and the »North« in Jeremiah,« ZAW 101 (1989) 223–232.

2 For a summary of scholarship on this point, see Leo G. Perdue, »Jeremiah in Modern Research,« in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, eds. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984) 6–10.

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this foe and the eventual arrival of the Babylonians on the international scene.³ Reimer argued that the prophet's words concerning a foe from the north could be understood as warnings about a concrete earthly power who would come to wreak YHWH's punishment, but that the nature of this language did not require him to have actually had a specific enemy already in mind; Jeremiah could have been speaking in general terms of an as-yet-unidentified enemy. Reimer thus sought to disengage Jeremiah's references to a foe from the north from the historical rise of the Babylonians.

Presupposed by the perceived dilemma were, firstly, that the corpus associated with Jeremiah derived at least initially from a prophet working in the late seventh and early sixth centuries and, secondly, that the warnings about the foe from the north dated from the earliest part of this prophet's career. Aside from the general working assumption that the prophet's *ipsissima verba* were most likely to be found in the book's poetic contents—that is, the same poetry in which the foe from the north appears—the association between the foe from the north and Jeremiah's early career was based on the appearance in 1:13–15 of a vision about a pot orientated in relation to the north, in immediate proximity to material widely understood as the prophet's call and/or commissioning (1:4–10, 11–12). On the basis of the book's own date formulae (1:2–3), the prophet's activity began during the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, in 627 BCE. As the Babylonians did not pose a substantial and evident threat to the Levantine kingdoms at that time, the enemy that 1:13–15 says will come from the north could not be understood to be the Babylonians, barring a great deal more political foresight than is generally accounted to Jeremiah, or indeed any other prophet, by modern scholarship.⁴

As is well known, such an early date for the commencement of Jeremiah's ministry provokes a headache with respect to the book's non-mention of reforms attributed to Josiah by 2Kgs 22–23. Indeed, aside from a suspect heading in 3:6 and a handful of appearances in the patronymics of his successors, Josiah is absent from the book. Short of rejecting outright the date formulae's claims of a Jeremianic asso-

3 Richard P. Vaggione, »Over All Asia? The Extent of the Scythian Domination in Herodotus,« *JBL* 92 (1973) 523–530.

4 The association of the foe from the north material with an early date was further underscored by the tendency, first, to identify Israel, the addressee of much of the poetry in chs. 2–6, as the (former) northern kingdom and, second, to connect Jeremiah's ministry to this audience with Josiah's expansionist ambitions early in his reign. On the transition of Mesopotamian power from Assyria to Babylonia, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East: ca. 3000–323 BC* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 266–277 and Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East: c.3000–330 B.C.*, vol. 2, *Routledge History of the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 1997), 540–546; 589–597. On the identity of »Israel« in Jeremiah, see C. L. Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined: Migration, Trauma, and Empire in the Sixth Century BCE*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

ciation with Josiah's reign, some scholars tried suggesting that the prophet was born in 627, or that his »call« occurred in that year but his »commissioning« and actual activity not until much later, thereby explaining his mysterious silence with regard to Josiah's reforms during the earlier period.⁵ More dramatically, others concluded that the claim that Jeremiah's activity began in the reign of Josiah was introduced in order to associate the prophet with the reforming king or to grant him a suitably Mosaic forty-year ministry, rather than deriving from historical fact.⁶ Most recently, studies have drawn attention to the literary function of ch. 1 as an introduction to the book as a whole, noting the way it foreshadows themes which will appear in the following chapters and introduces vocabulary and imagery which appear at key points in the book.⁷ The awkwardness in the juxtaposition of the antenatal conversation between YHWH and Jeremiah in 1:4–10 and the visions which begin in 1:11 has also been highlighted, with particular emphasis on the poetry-prose disjuncture and the incongruous numbering of the pot vision as the »second« word of YHWH, even though in the extant text it is the third.

The perception of a dilemma with regard to who or what Jeremiah had in mind when he referred to a foe from the north was thus, at the time of Reimer's study, intimately linked to the assumption that the vision of such a foe in 1:13–15 and the utterance of poetic oracles about that foe in chs. 4–6 occurred at the beginning of Jeremiah's career, which began in the reign of Josiah and therefore prior to the appearance of the Babylonians on the scene. In the aftermath of the last three

5 Thus, for example, Holladay proposes a »low chronology« in which Jeremiah's activities begin only in 609, after the Babylonians have made their presence known (see William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah (1–25)*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986], esp. 43).

6 For a brief review of the points of contention concerning the association between Jeremiah and Josiah and the various means by which scholars have attempted to circumvent them, see Perdue, »Jeremiah in Modern Research«: 2–6.

7 Including but hardly limited to the sextet of verbs in 1:10, which recur throughout the book (12:14–17; 18:7–9; 24:6; 31:28,38–40; 42:10; 45:4); the motifs of watching (1:12, cf. 5:6; 44:27) and of the womb (1:4, cf. 15:10; 20:14–18); the conflict over the prophetic word (1:17–29, cf. esp. chs. 27–29); and, of course, the mention of the north (1:13 and below). See variously Saul M. Olyan, »To Uproot and to Pull Down, to Build and to Plant: Jer 1:10 and Its Earliest Interpreters,« in *Hesed Ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs*, eds. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1998) 63–72; Kathleen M. Rochester, *Prophetic Ministry in Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, CBET 65 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); Carol Dempsey, *Jeremiah: Preacher of Grace, Poet of Truth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007); Thomas Römer, »The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah as a Supplement to the So-called Deuteronomistic History,« in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (London: Equinox, 2009) 168–183; 172–174; Anneli Aejmelaeus, »Jeremiah at the Turning-Point of History: The Function of Jer. XXV 1–14 in the Book of Jeremiah,« *VT* 52 (2002) 459–482: 465; 481 f.

decades of research, this connection between the judgment looming from the north and an early—that is, pre-Babylonian—period of Jeremiah’s prophetic activity is no longer so inextricable. The poetry of chs. 2–6 seems likely to predate the destruction of Jerusalem, but nothing in it requires a date prior to the rise of the Babylonians, whilst ch. 1 is so clearly linked to the final form of the book that any insistence on dating 1:13–15 prior to the final decade and a half or so of the seventh century seems equally insupportable.

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The second major influence on interpretations of the foe from the north in Jeremiah is reflected in Reimer’s final suggestion: that this image of a foe from the north alludes to a mythological tradition of YHWH’s residence in or on Zaphon, the mountain of the god(s). The depiction of the enemy in these terms may thus be assumed to grant it mythological overtones, by associating it with the divine abode.

The roots of this argument lie in two short monographs by Otto Eißfeldt and by Aarre Lauha.⁸ These brought to the general attention of biblical scholars the discovery that the mountain of the gods in Ugaritic tradition was called »Zaphon« (*špn*).⁹ Though ultimately interested in the route by which the Israelites escaped from Egypt, nearly half of Eißfeldt’s study was devoted to biblical and extra-biblical references to »Baal-Zaphon« and to biblical references to »Zaphon«. The latter discussion focussed on a short list of key passages: Ezek 32:30; Ps 89:13; Job 26:7; Isa 14:13; and Ps 48:3. Under the influence of his preceding conclusions concerning Baal-Zaphon—that the epithet suggests a cult to the god Baal, located on Mount Zaphon—Eißfeldt argued that these five passages reveal Israelite knowledge of a »mythischen Nordberg« and that this knowledge was assimilated from northern Syrian religious traditions into the Yahwistic cult, possibly in connection with assertions of YHWH’s triumph over other southern Levantine deities.¹⁰

The influence of these conclusions on interpretations of the foe from the north in Jeremiah, specifically, may be traced to Eißfeldt’s conclusions concerning the

⁸ Otto Eißfeldt, *Baal Zaphon, Zeus Kasios und der Durchzug der Israeliten durchs Meer*, Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums 1 (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1932); Aarre Lauha, *Zaphon: Der Norden und die Nordvölker im Alten Testament*, Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae B 49 (Helsinki: Der Finnischen Literaturgesellschaft, 1943).

⁹ The physical location of the mountain to the north of the city seems likely related to the name, though whether the cardinal direction derives from the name of the mountain or vice versa is impossible to determine, though Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*, 57–58 insists that the cardinal sense is secondary. Curiously *špn* does not appear to have been used in the cardinal sense in Ugaritic, even though this is the dominant sense in Hebrew and apparently also in other dialects of Northwest Semitic, as well as the sense in which it was absorbed into Akkadian (HALOT 3:1046–1047; DNWSI 2:972–973; AHW 3:1098; cf. DULAT³:777).

¹⁰ Eißfeldt, *Baal Zaphon*, 14, cf. 16.

possibility of a wider presence of this mythological tradition in Israelite literature: »Nach alledem muß es als sehr wahrscheinlich gelten, daß die Israeliten das Wort *šāpôn* keineswegs nur in dem Sinn »Norden«, »nördliche Gegend« gebraucht haben, sondern daß sie gelegentlich eine ganz bestimmte Lokalität, nämlich den späteren mons Casius, damit meinen.«¹¹ If *šāpôn* appears in a biblical text, the interpreter must reckon with the possibility that it carries mythological resonances, imported from the Ugaritic understanding of that mountain as the home of the gods.

Having opened the door to this possibility through his interpretation of Ezek 32:30; Ps 89:13; Job 26:7; Isa 14:13; and Ps 48:3, Eißfeldt swung rapidly through two dozen other biblical texts, bringing them together with various extra-biblical traditions and the work of Hermann Gunkel to argue that the mythological northern mountain should be further associated with the deity's battle against chaos. These conclusions have since given rise to numerous variations on the theme of the north as the »divine storehouse of evil«, where »powers of disaster are bred«¹² and which is invoked as a reference to a »mythological future«, possessing a »mythological-liturgical character« that »is not a reference to a specific, historical threat«.¹³ *Šāpôn*'s mythological baggage is now so widely presumed that it is frequently invoked as a commonly-held fact, not even worth a footnote.

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To criticise Eißfeldt for sharing the enthusiasm for Ugaritically-influenced interpretations of the biblical texts that was common to his time is perhaps unfair, but the amount of influence his conclusions have exerted on subsequent interpretations of Jeremiah render it necessary to draw explicit attention to the underlying reasoning behind claims that the foe from the north in Jeremiah may be relegated to the realm of mythological and essentially ahistorical imagery. The identification of the foe from the north in Jeremiah as a vague, ominous enemy, circumventing the awkwardness involved in identifying a specific historical foe prior to the advent of the Babylonians, derives fundamentally from an era in which there was very little attempt to differentiate amongst biblical traditions, in which scholarly conclusions frequently constituted heavily systematised conflation of multiple witnesses drawn from across the biblical materials as well as the wider ancient world. To a degree, of course, such systematisation and conflation continues; it is often difficult to interpret an individual text in isolation and we often turn to related material

¹¹ *Ebd.*, 16; cf. Lauha, *Zaphon*, 41: »nach dem orientalischen Weltbild der Norden ein Berg ist«.

¹² Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 336; 242.

¹³ Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 106; McKane, *Jeremiah 1–25*, 233; for similar signs of the extent to which this idea has pervaded the literature, see e. g. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 43; John Hill, *Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 50–53; Frederik Poulsen, *Representing Zion: Judgement and Salvation in the Old Testament* (London: Routledge, 2015), 38.

elsewhere in our attempts to elucidate the meaning and context of a passage. Such efforts, however, must be undertaken cautiously, with due attention to the differences between texts—chronological, contextual, etc.—as well as their similarities. In the context of interpretations of the foe from the north in Jeremiah, two particular issues arise.

The first concerns the diachronic relationship between Jeremiah and the texts that Eißfeldt identified as evidence for *šāpôn*'s mythological associations. Isa 14:13; Job 26:7; and Ezek 32:20 are all very probably later than the Jeremiah passages, whilst the Psalms swim in their usual sea of chronological ambiguities. The longer list of passages to which Eißfeldt appealed in his subsequent argument—including Ezek 29; 32; 38; Joel 12; Ps 74; and Dan 7—are even more striking.¹⁴ To argue from these texts to a divine abode on a northern mountain as the intellectual and mythological background for references to an enemy who will come from the north in Jeremiah—in material that likely antedates the majority of this evidence, even allowing for the book's complicated editorial history—is severely problematic.

Chronological matters aside, the second and more critical problem is that the exegetical basis of Eißfeldt's assertion—that these texts reflect Israelite knowledge of a »mythischen Nordberg«, upon which the deity resides and whence the divine wrath originates—is extremely weak. The basis of Eißfeldt's argument consisted of five passages: Ezek 32:30; Ps 89:13; Job 26:7; Isa 14:13; and Ps 48:3. *Šāpôn* appears more than 150 times in MT and, apart from these five passages, its semantic range is completely straightforward: it is one of the cardinal directions, with no metaphorical or otherwise abstract usage. The only texts identified as possible exceptions to this ordinary meaning and usage of *šāpôn* are the five texts identified by Eißfeldt.¹⁵

Of these the weakest is Ezek 32:30, in which the »princes of *šāpôn*« appear among other defeated nations and armies as Egypt's imminent fellow-inhabitants of the underworld. Although the identity of the princes is obscure, there is nothing to support Eißfeldt's assertion that »princes of the north« is nonsensical and that *šāpôn* must therefore be interpreted as Mount Zaphon or its surrounds.¹⁶ It has also been proposed that *špn klm* may be an error for *šr wkl*; this would introduce Tyre

¹⁴ Indeed, drawing on Ezek 28:16; Ps 48:2, and other texts, Lauha proposed that the notion of a divine theophany from the north should not be dated prior to the exile, and argued that the idea originated in Babylonian culture, rather than being a concept native to the biblical thought-world (*Zaphon*, 41–51). However, he deemed the idea of a *threat* from the north to be alien to Babylonian thought and, having dated Jeremiah's oracles to the Assyrian period (and rejected the Scythian hypothesis), thus deemed Jeremiah's enemy from the north apocalyptic—an unspecific enemy and a disaster that would be universal (*Zaphon*, 80–82).

¹⁵ See DCH 7:146 f.

¹⁶ Eißfeldt, *Zaphon*, 11 f.

alongside the immediately following Sidonians, as might be most naturally expected.¹⁷ If this is correct, there are no »princes of the north« to be concerned about anyway. Alternatively, *šāpôn* may simply function in its usual cardinal sense, with the phrase thus encompassing the various rulers of the northern Levantine states.

The four remaining passages are more interesting. The most peculiar is Job 26:7 which, in an acclamation of YHWH's creative acts, describes YHWH as the one »who stretches out *šāpôn* upon the void, hangs earth upon that which is not«. To understand *šāpôn* as the »north« here, in its usual directional sense, is indeed quite difficult. A reference to Mount Zaphon, however, is hardly any better; aside from being an odd image in and of itself, the depiction of a mountain being stretched out over the void (*tôhû*, as in Gen 1:2) has no apparent point of contact with descriptions of creation elsewhere. By contrast, the preceding verb (*nṯh*) is well attested in acclamations of YHWH's creative acts. Where YHWH undertakes such an activity elsewhere, however, the object he stretches out is the heavens (*šamayim*, Job 9:8; Ps 104:2; Isa 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; etc.; Jer 10:12; 51:15; Zech 12:1; cf. Ps 18:10; 144:5).¹⁸ This wider consistency, together with the expectations of the immediate context, has prompted almost all commentators to understand the object which YHWH stretches out in Job 26:7 as the heavens, even if the details of how *šāpôn* is meant to signify such an entity varies.¹⁹

Given the contextual imperative, it is perhaps surprising that no attempt seems yet to have been made to connect *šāpôn* in Job 26:7 with *šph* II, »to overlay, lay over, cover« (*šāpôn* I »north« is usually associated with *šph* I »to watch, look, look out«, though this is not frequently emphasised).²⁰ In the ancient cosmological context, an image of the heavens as the universe's covering—the firmament laid over

17 Paul Joüon, »Notes philologiques sur le texte hébreu d'Ezéchiel,« *Bib* 10 (1929) 304–312: 310; see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* 2, 168.

18 As Clines, *Job* 21–37, 635 notes, the underlying metaphor is of the heavens as a tent, stretched out over the pillars or foundations of the earth as a tent upon its poles; the immediate point is thus the impressiveness of YHWH having stretched out his heavenly tent without need for a centre pole (»he stretches ... out upon the void«).

19 Dhorme proposed an image of the celestial region around the North Star, envisioning this pole star as the anchor-point of the heavens (*A Commentary on the Book of Job*, transl. Harold Knight [London: Nelson, 1967], 372); Clines ventures »the northern part of the sky, perhaps conceived of as the highest heaven« (*Job* 21–37, 623).

20 On the derivation of nouns of this form from verbs ending in *h* see James L. Sagarin, *Hebrew Noun Patterns (Mishqalim): Morphology, Semantics, and Lexicon* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1987), 132; GKc§ 85u. DCH 7:147 offers a derivation from *špn* »to hide« as the origin of a sixth (!) possible meaning of *šāpôn* as »cloudy sky«, but the present author has yet to see this suggestion taken up elsewhere in the literature either. The persistent uncertainty regarding these several passages is reflected in the number of alternatives suggested by DCH.

the created realm—would seem quite natural. Whatever the etymology, Job 26:7 weighs against the claim that a non-directional *šāpôn* should to be understood as an allusion to Mount Zaphon. Rather, it suggests that the heavens themselves may be described as *šāpôn*, without a simultaneous demand that they be understood as some sort of »mythischen Nordberg«—let alone any notion that YHWH is actually resident on such a mountain.²¹

The interpretation of *šāpôn* as a reference to a »mythischen Nordberg« is similarly difficult in Ps 48:3. The psalmist opines that »Mount Zion is a beautiful height, an exultation of all the earth, *yark^ctê šāpôn*: the city of the great king«. The psalm's association of YHWH with Mount Zion is undisputed, as is its continuity with the significance of Mount Zion in the theology of the Psalms and the biblical tradition more widely. What is less clear is Mount Zion's description with reference to *šāpôn*, insofar as Zion is in no conventional geographical sense located in or on the »pinnacle [or: furthest reaches] of the north«. ²² Thus it appeared on Eißfeldt's radar, suggesting that the psalmist intended to elevate the status of Mount Zion by invoking Mount Zaphon.

We may firstly wish to note that this is not, of itself, tantamount to a usurpation of the mountain's mythological baggage; if it is meant as a reference to Mount Zaphon, it may be no more than an ambitious comparison. Zion, though she may look little, is as great as a mountain more than twice her size! Significantly, however, Eißfeldt argued that such assertions arose as part of YHWH's triumph over the gods of Canaan; that is, YHWH had laid claim to the holy mountain of the Canaanite gods as his own residence.²³ Whilst hardly denying that much of the biblical texts' characterisation of YHWH was adopted or adapted from the characterisations of other Levantine and ancient Near Eastern gods, the idea that YHWH is resident on some »mythischen Nordberg« is antithetical to the thrust of Ps 48. Its absolute and unambiguous focus is on Zion: whatever compliments and accolades are thrust up on it, Zion in Judah is the holy city and the holy mountain of God. To

21 Given the evidence which suggests that Baal, at least, claimed residence on Mount Zaphon, we might speculate that the ultimate origins of the sense *šāpôn* »heavens« lay in an association between the mountain and the god(s?) who resided there, which resulted in the use of the name of the mountain to refer to the divine realm; Wildberger has noted a similar elision between Mount Olympus and heaven in Greece (*Isaiah 13–27*, 65). Nevertheless, whilst such a development would be of historical interest, it would not obviate the evidence that the term appears in biblical Hebrew as a term for the divine realm, without recollection of the original earthly mountain. It is perhaps relevant, in this regard, to note that Mount Zaphon (modern Mount Kılıç, on the Turkish-Syrian border), is more than 600 kilometres (400 miles) north of Jerusalem. It would not, in other words, have been a physical landmark that impinged on Jerusalemite consciousness in a significant way.

22 On the translation of *yark^ctê*, see HALOT 2:439; DCH 4:299.

23 Eißfeldt, *Zaphon*, 16; cf. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 473 [*Psalmen I*, 357]; Dahood, *Psalms 1–50*, 290.

morph Zion into Zaphon, to conflate it with that other, distant divine mountain, is not only blatantly to disregard geography but to misread the focus of the entire psalm. Whatever the significance of *yark'tê šāpôn*, it must be understood in this context: Zion, *yark'tê šāpôn*, is not a mythologised mountain in the far north but the centrepiece of YHWH's presence amongst his people in Judah. With this in mind, the insights of Job 26:7 are sensibly re-applied; *šāpôn* in Ps 48:3 may be readily understood as term for the heavens, without demanding any inherent reference to an earthly mountain. Thus: »Mount Zion is a beautiful height, an exultation of all the earth, the pinnacle of the heavens«. Zion sits at the nexus at which the heavenly and earthly realms meet.

That *šāpôn* might be understood as the heavenly firmament in this manner seems to be confirmed again by Isa 14:13. Part of a comparison between Babylon and Helal ben Shachar, the text places a claim to »sit upon the mount of assembly, in *yark'tê šāpôn*« in the mouth of Babylon.²⁴ Commentators almost invariably assume that the mountain in question is Mount Zaphon and that the image of a divine assembly on that mountain has been taken over from Ugaritic mythology, along with that of the rest of the section.²⁵ The immediate problem with this is that the non-Israelite background of this material has been assumed but is in fact not well-founded. As Wildberger observes, the only mythological component of the taunt song which is not otherwise amply attested in the Hebrew Bible is the downfall of Helal ben Shachar himself. His origins, however, remain entirely obscure; no other evidence for this tradition has surfaced elsewhere in the ancient Near East.²⁶ Until such evidence should appear, the suggestion that he has been taken over from some non-Israelite source remains unsubstantiated supposition. As for the rest of the passage, there is ultimately nothing particularly »Canaanite« about it, especially once the old sharp distinction between »Israelite« and »Canaanite« traditions is abandoned.

The immediate consequence for Isa 14:13 is that there is no particular justification for interpreting the passage in »Canaanite« terms rather than »Israelite« ones. With this in mind, Wildberger concluded against the introduction of Mount Zaphon to the passage: »it is unlikely that the occurrence of צפון (north) in this passage should be taken as a reference to the Ugaritic mountain of the gods«. ²⁷ Supportive of this conclusion is the context, in which Helal ben Shachar is described as »fallen from heaven« (*šāmayim*) and »cut down to earth« in the wake of a failed ambition

²⁴ The poem may have originated with reference to Assyria, though its current form concerns Babylon; for present purposes the difference is irrelevant.

²⁵ E. g., Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 143; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 322; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 288.

²⁶ Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 55 f.; 63; cf. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 264.

²⁷ Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 66.

to »ascend to heaven« (*šāmayim*) and »raise [his] throne above the stars«, upon »the tops of the clouds« (14:12–14). In the midst of this, *yark^ctê šāpôn* as »the furthest reaches of the heavens« perfectly suits the imagery, which contrasts the heavenly heights to which Helal ben Shachar has aspired with the depths to which he has sunk (variously earth, v. 12; Sheol, and the Pit, v. 15). The contrast between earthly depths and heavenly heights weighs against a reference to an earthly mountain; this interpretation also obviates the need to appeal to an otherwise unknown tradition of YHWH's divine residence on Mount Zaphon.²⁸ Indeed, it is worth (re-)emphasizing that all other evidence for a mountainous mythology in the biblical texts associates YHWH with Zion or with Sinai/Horeb.²⁹ To introduce a third mountain of YHWH is to multiply mountains quite unnecessarily.

This brings us lastly to Ps 89:13, which declares to YHWH that »*šāpôn* and *yāmîn*, you created them; Tabor and Hermon shout joyfully at your name«. The context is once more a description of YHWH's creative acts: an emphasis on YHWH's all-encompassing power together with a depiction of creation in praise of YHWH. In this context—and in the absence of any mountain known as »Yamin«—*šāpôn* seems best understood as part of a straightforward north-south merism for all of creation.³⁰

In sum: of the five texts identified by Eißfeldt as evidence of an Israelite tradition of a mythical northern mountain, two are more convincingly read as *šāpôn* in its common, cardinal sense, while three suggest *šāpôn* as a synonym for »heavens«. Only one of these, Ps 48:3, makes any reference to a mountain—and then the mountain in question is emphatically identified as Zion, in Jerusalem. To argue from there to a network of allusions through which Jeremiah's descriptions of Judah's enemies as coming from the north invoke a mythological army from the realm of the gods is to build a palace on a toothpick (entirely aside from the conceptual incoherence of YHWH bringing a cosmic army against Jerusalem from inside the city, namely, Zion). Buoyed by a confidence characteristic of mid-century scholarship, Eißfeldt's interpretation of a handful of verses quickly spiralled beyond the evidence. Examined again, it is obvious that these texts are a long way from a solid foundation for

²⁸ The verse does perhaps contain a *double entendre*; the accusation clearly concerns Babylon's aggrandisement of divine prerogative, in terms which echo those used to describe the heavenly divine abode in Ps 48:3, but the location of Assyria/Babylon »in the farthest reaches of the north« (from the perspective of Jerusalem) adds an additional layer of meaning.

²⁹ Note, moreover, that Mount Zaphon was probably not the mountain of the assembly of the Ugaritic gods, in any case—Mount Zaphon was associated with Baal, whereas the divine assembly was presided over by El, whose abode was in the heavens, above the stars (see Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 65 f.; cf. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 322). The reference in v. 13 to a »mount of assembly« thus hardly constitutes justification for reading the following *yark^ctê šāpôn* as a reference to that mountain.

³⁰ Contra Eißfeldt, *Zaphon*, 12 f., who insists that *yāmîn* must be a mountain because *šāpôn* is.

the theory that a mythological northern mountain of YHWH was commonplace in ancient Israelite thought—let alone the identification of this northern mountain as the source of a quasi-apocalyptic divine army about to storm the gates of Jerusalem.

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In the wake of Eißfeldt's proposals, however, the idea that Jeremiah's references to an enemy arriving in Judah from the north should be interpreted with reference to YHWH's abode on a mythological northern mountain quickly pervaded the secondary literature, providing a useful escape from the perceived awkwardness of passages caught up in debates over the relationship of Jeremiah's prophetic career to the reign of Josiah and the transition between Assyrian and Babylonian power. From an Eißfeldtian angle there was no need to worry overmuch about whom Jeremiah had in mind in these passages, because the inherent mythological undertones of *šāpôn* obviated the need for specificity. Jeremiah's references to the north could be understood simply as invocations of a »divine storehouse of evil«³¹ and »the direction out of which the demonic enemy descends«, rather than any particular enemy.³² Eißfeldt has thus cast a long and remarkably persistent shadow over these texts, buttressed most recently by a hesitation to place any part of the book into a concrete historical context. For those anxious not to place any greater credence in the book's historical self-assertions than absolutely necessary, an unidentified, divinely-driven enemy originating in a distant divine realm has offered an amiable vagueness.

With due respect for the interpretive challenges raised by the processes that produced the extant book(s) of Jeremiah, an examination of *šāpôn* in Jeremiah that is not burdened by Eißfeldt's conclusions makes clear that this resort to anonymity and ambivalence is not necessary. Rather, the enemy that will come against Judah from the north is simply the Babylonian Empire—whose rising power from the mid-620s is timely enough to satisfy all but the most strident of Jeremianic historical apologists. Indeed, once the expectation that the north carries mythological overtones is let go, the evidence concerning this envisaged enemy from the north is so straightforward as to hardly warrant rehearsal. Given the pervasiveness with

31 Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 336, on 4:6; cf. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 203, on 6:22 (»there may be traces of the mythological north here«).

32 B.S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, SBT 27 (London: SCM, 1962), 88, cross-referencing to his own B.S. Childs, »The Enemy from the North and the Chaos Tradition,« *JBL* 79 (1959) 187–198. Typically, Childs conceived of »history« and »myth« as irreconcilable antitheses. This is now widely recognised to be an inaccurate understanding of ancient ideas about divine involvement in historical realities; classically, see Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestation in the Ancient Near East and in Israel*, CBOT 1 (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1967).

which those expectations persist, however, it seems advisable to provide a short review of this evidence before concluding. This is not limited to passages that satisfy a pre-determined set of criteria identifying them as relating to »the foe from the north«, but includes each of the 25 passages in MT Jeremiah that use *šāpôn*.

These 25 references to *šāpôn* in Jeremiah conform to three types. First are passages in which the term refers to the location from which the looming devastation of Judah—or rather, the enemy chosen by YHWH to enact it—will come. These are the passages that have prompted the focus on »the foe from the north« as an identifiable and repetitive trope. Second are passages that describe the eventual return of Judah's population from exile, referring to the location of that exile as in the north. Third and finally are passages that turn this enemy's cruelty back upon itself, envisioning that it, too, will someday face attack from the north. We deal with each of these categories in turn.

The canonically first reference to Judah's devastation coming from the north, and perhaps the most influential, is the vision of a pot orientated in relation to the north (1:13, *mipp^enē šāpônâ*). The interpretation that follows this vision declares that evil will be loosed *miššāpôn* »from the north« upon the inhabitants of the land (1:14). In 1:15 YHWH then calls out *šāpônâ*, »to the north«, summoning the agent(s) of this evil, »all the clans of the kingdoms«, to their task.³³ Translations tend to obscure the directional element of this command: the directional *he* is usually ignored, and the northern qualification applied directly to »all the clans of the kingdoms« (thus, »all the clans of the kingdoms of the north«), rather than making clear that *šāpônâ* »to the north« is the direction in which YHWH issues his summons (»behold I am calling out to all the clans of the kingdoms, towards the north«).³⁴ Though the difference is slight, this propensity to translate *šāpônâ* as a description of the kingdoms rather than a description of YHWH's action contributes to a vaguer, more abstract image of the enemy, and has facilitated the interpretive tendency to disconnect the divine message from concrete earthly realities.

In 4:6 a related warning is proclaimed in Judah and in Jerusalem: a great, destructive evil—»a lion ... a destroyer of nations« (v. 7)—is coming *miššāpôn* »from the north« and will prompt the populace to seek refuge in the fortified cities. More specifically, 6:1 warns the sons of Benjamin to flee from Jerusalem, for it is Jeru-

³³ The directional *he* appears also in 3:12 and 46:6. The unparalleled »all the clans of the kingdoms« in v. 15 prompts many interpreters to drop one of the two nouns, usually with reference to 25:9, »all the clans of the north« (see Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 22; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 238; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 24; note however that *šāpôn* lacks the directional *he* in 25:9).

³⁴ It is even ignored by DCH, which lists the verse under appearances of »north« in the sense of a northern territory or northern region, rather than with other instances with directional *he* (DCH 7:146 f.).

salem on which the sight of this »evil« that comes *miššāpôn* »from the north« is set. The adjured flight is toward Tekoa and Beth-hakkerem; while the location of the latter is unknown, the former was certainly to the south of the city. The image is thus of an enemy coming from the geographical north, before whom refugees flee to the south. In 6:22 the enemy which will devastate Zion is described more fully as *'am bā' mē'ereš šāpôn* »a people coming from a northern land«, »a great nation roused from the farthest parts of the earth«. The overwhelming power of this enemy *mē'ereš šāpôn* »from a northern land« is conveyed in 10:22 in terms of the terrific noise it makes as it approaches, and in 13:20 the king and the queen mother are invited to gaze upon those coming *miššāpôn* »from the north« from their miserable vantage point on the ground.

The principal meaning of *šāpôn* in these texts is the geographical and cardinal direction »north«, in keeping with the overwhelmingly dominant meaning of the word in its wider usage.³⁵ The enemy that is about to devastate Judah is envisioned as approaching the kingdom from cardinal north, and the description of the enemy in relation to the north reflects an understanding of its origin in a place located in that direction. This sense is indicated by various elements of these passages. First, it is implied by the imagery of the opening vision, which loses much of its effect if the physical orientation of the pot relative to the north is non-geographical, abstracted, or arbitrary. Second, it is apparent from the descriptions of Judah's enemy that this enemy is not conceived as a fantastical or purely mythical enemy, summoned out of national nightmares, but as a real army that will inflict real damage on Judah (1:15; 13:19–20; 25:9), its cities (1:15; 6:1, 22–23; 10:22; 13:19–20) and its territories (13:19–20), as well as its neighbours (25:9). It is real enough to be heard (10:22, cf. 6:22) and both to see (6:1) and to be seen (13:20). Sensory descriptions may be deployed metaphorically, but there seems no reason to take them thus in these particular passages. Indeed, the threatened devastation would lose much of its force were it not real.

Moreover, the enemy that currently resides in »a northern land« and will therefore approach Judah »from the north« is, in a few key passages, clearly identified as Babylonia. Geographically, this is perfectly sensible: although the heartland of the Mesopotamian empires stands east of Jerusalem in absolute terms, the hostility of the Arabian deserts to military campaigning meant that the Babylonians approached the southern Levantine territories it sought to control from cardinal north, having traversed the distance from Mesopotamia via the more hospitable route of the Fertile Crescent. This identification of the enemy that will approach Judah from the north with Babylonia is most explicit in MT 25:9, in which YHWH

³⁵ See DCH 7:146 f.

concludes that the time is ripe »to send for all the tribes of the north (*kol mišp^hôt šāpôn*) ... even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant«. ³⁶

It is worth recalling, too, the political realities of the late seventh and sixth centuries would have all but guaranteed that an enemy described as approaching from the north would have been understood in Mesopotamian terms: the only potential invaders on the scene at that historical juncture were Egyptian or Mesopotamian and when Egypt invaded the Levant its armies came from the south, not the north. Indeed, the Babylonians are clearly identified as the northern empire in the oracle concerning Egypt: the Egyptians' confrontation with the Babylonians takes place *šāpônâ 'al yad n^ehar p^erat* »in the north along the Euphrates River« (46:6, similarly 46:10, *b^eeres šāpôn 'el n^ehar p^erat* »in a northern land, at the Euphrates River«), the Babylonian army is likened to *qeres miššāpôn* »a gadfly from the north« (46:20), and ultimately it is to this *'am šāpôn* »northern people« (46:24) that Egypt will be handed over (46:24). Even if the explicit heading in 46:2 is discounted, anyone with even the slightest knowledge of late seventh century politics will recognise in this chapter a clear reference to Egypt's northern enemy as Babylonia.

The second category of references to the north is closely related to the first, insofar as Judah's destruction by a Babylonian enemy results in the population of the devastated state being taken into exile in Babylonia and, in due course, returning from that direction. That is, because the north is where the Babylonians originate, the north is the location to which the defeated Jerusalemites will be (have been) deported and thus the place from which they or their descendants are envisioned as eventually returning. Thus, *kî 'im hay YHWH 'ušer he'elâ 'et b^enê yišrā'el mē'eres šāpôn ūmikkol hā'urāšôt 'ušer hiddîhām šāmmâ* »As YHWH lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from a northern land, and from all the lands where he had driven them ...« (16:15, closely paralleled by 23:8) and *hin^enî mēbî' 'ôtām mē'eres šāpôn w^eqibbaštîm miyyark^etê 'āreš* »behold I am bringing them from a northern land and gathering them from the farthest reaches »of the earth« (31:8). Again, the ordinary geographical meaning for *šāpôn*, consonant with its majority usage elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, is the simplest explanation of its use in these passages. The twofold descrip-

³⁶ Later in the chapter (25:26) *šāpôn* is used in a list of all those who will fall victim to the Babylonian predations (before finally the Babylonians themselves will fall); that the term retains an essentially geographical reference is evident from the structure of the list, which after mentioning Egypt rolls through a litany of kingdoms and peoples that begins in the southern Levant around Judah and works its way further and further northward, finally summing up with an explicit explanation that the devastation will involve »all the kings of the north« (which, in the scheme of the known world at that time, was more or less equivalent to »all the kingdoms of the earth«). The phrase functions as a catch-all, but it clearly envisions real people and places; there is no mythical enemy here. LXX 25:9 omits the explicit identification with Babylon, in keeping with its overall *Tendenz*, and reflects a likely Hebrew *Vorlage* of *kol mišp^hôt miššāpôn*.

tion of the return as from »a northern land«, as well as other lands more generally—»all the lands« or »the farthest reaches of the earth«—supports the specific identification of the former with Babylonia, as the primary destination of Judah's involuntary resettlement, while acknowledging a wider diaspora.

The third category of references to the north is slightly more complex, albeit not by much. This category comprises four instances, all in the oracles against Babylon. In each, the destroyer of Babylon is identified as coming from the north (50:3 [*miššāpôn*], 9 [*mē'ereš šāpôn*], 41 [*miššāpôn*]; 51:48 [*miššāpôn*]). This could be interpreted as a geographical comment regarding the origins of Babylonia's eventual destroyers, the Persians, or of their approach towards Babylon in 539 BCE. More likely, however, is that the language derives from an underlying principle of poetic or talionic justice, in which imagery that was previously used to describe Babylonia's defeat of Jerusalem is re-applied to describe Babylonia's own eventual defeat. Thus the warning to Jerusalem in 6:22–23—

See, a people is coming from the land of the north (*miššāpôn*),
 a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth.
 They grasp the bow and the javelin,
 they are cruel and have no mercy,
 their sound is like the roaring sea;
 they ride on horses,
 equipped like a warrior for battle,
 against you, O daughter Zion!—

is repeated almost verbatim in 50:41–42. Only the final addressee is altered to suit the new context: now the people coming *miššāpôn* »from the north« are coming »against you, O daughter Babylon!« Just as Jerusalem was destroyed, so now will Babylon be destroyed in turn: cruelty for cruelty. The talionic principle is even more explicit in 51:48–49, which declare that *miššāpôn yābô' lāh haššôddim* »from the north destroyers will come against her«, because »Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, as the slain of all the earth have fallen because of Babylon«.

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Šāpôn in Jeremiah consistently refers to the cardinal direction—just as one would expect, given the dominance of its use in this sense elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. *Šāpôn* is the direction from which Judah's invaders will come and the direction in which the population will be taken after their defeat; it is correspondingly the direction from which those who have been deported and their descendants will ultimately return. The enemy that bears down on Judah from this direction is clearly identified as the Babylonian Empire; this is sometimes explicit and frequently implied. The only exception to this is when the conqueror is Babylonia's own enemy, when the identification of Judah's destroyer as a Babylonian Empire

that will approach it from the north is transformed into a talionic promise of Babylon's own eventual destruction by an enemy that will bear down on it from the north. There was no need to invoke an ominous, mythologically-inflected army sent down from the mountain of the gods: the power of the Babylonian Empire as it approached Judah was frightening enough.

Abstract: The »foe from the north« is a well-known trope in the book of Jeremiah. In 1989 David Reimer argued that this enemy should be understood as a nonspecific earthly enemy, with mythical overtones deriving from the location of YHWH's divine abode on Mount Zaphon. Contemporary historiographical debates, together with Otto Eißfeldt's arguments for an Israelite tradition of a »mythischen Nordberg«, exerted significant influence on Reimer's discussion. This article examines these presuppositions, reconsiders the evidence, and argues that Jeremiah's enemy »from the north« is a simple geographical reference to the Babylonian Empire.

Keywords: Jeremiah, *šāpôn*, the foe from the north, Babylonian Empire

Zusammenfassung: Der »Feind aus dem Norden« ist eine bekannte Trope im Jeremiabuch. 1989 vertrat David Reimer die These, dieser Feind sei als unspezifischer irdischer Feind zu verstehen, wobei ein gewisser mythischer Unterton von der Lokalisierung der Wohnstätte JHWHs auf dem Berg Zaphon herrühre. Gegenwärtige historiographische Debatten sowie Otto Eißfeldt's Plädoyer für die Existenz einer israelitischen Tradition vom »mythischen Nordberg« beeinflussten Reimers Diskussion in signifikanter Weise. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht diese Vorannahmen, erwägt den Befund neu und argumentiert, dass es sich bei Jeremias Feind »aus dem Norden« um eine einfache geographische Referenz auf das Babylonische Reich handelt.

Schlagwörter: Jeremia, *šāpôn*, der Feind aus dem Norden, Babylonisches Reich

Résumé: »L'ennemi du nord« est un motif bien connu du livre de Jérémie. En 1989, David Reimer a défendu la thèse que cet ennemi devait être compris comme un ennemi terrestre non spécifique, avec des connotations mythiques liées à l'emplacement de la demeure divine de YHWH sur le mont Tsaphon. Les débats historiographiques contemporains, ainsi que les arguments d'Otto Eißfeldt en faveur d'une tradition israélite d'un »mythischer Nordberg«, ont exercé une influence significative sur la discussion de Reimer. Cet article examine ces présupposés, reconsidère les preuves et soutient que l'ennemi de Jérémie »venant du nord« est une référence géographique à l'Empire néo-babylonien.

Mots-clés: Jérémie, *šāpôn*, l'ennemi du nord, Empire néo-babylonien