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Author(s): G. Levi Della Vida

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EL 'ELYON IN GENESIS 14 18-20

G. LEVI DELLA VIDA

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

THE god of Melchizedek king of Salem, El 'Elyon the Lord of Heaven and Earth,¹ is an isolated feature in Biblical literature. To be sure, mentions of 'Elyon (this name not being linked to El) are numerous in the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms, where Yahweh 'Elyon (47 3) and Elohim 'Elyon (57 3; 78 56) are also found.² The only passage, however, in which

¹ "Lord," and not creator" seems to be, here and elsewhere, the proper meaning of the participial form *qōnēh* (see J. A. Montgomery, *JAOS* 53 [1933] 116, and *Harvard Theological Review* 31 [1938] 145, n. 5). In no Semitic language does the root *qnw/y* mean "to create" or "to make" but only "to purchase," whence the meaning "to possess" may easily have developed. The meaning which *qny* has in Ethiopic, "to dominate," "to enslave" is undoubtedly another development of the original meaning, in a different direction. A verb *qanā* (with final *w*) is listed in the Arabic dictionaries as possessing, among others, the meaning "to create." However, no literary evidence supports this assumption, and I doubt that it is correct. In Deut 32 6 and Ps 139 13 both context and parallelism (*'āšā* and *kōnēn* in the former passage, and *sak* in the latter) suggest the translation "to create" (although the old versions are inconsistent in their rendering). However, both passages are late (for Deut 32 see R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 280; in v. 8 we find 'Elyon, but this is no proof of antiquity), and may have followed a "midrashic" interpretation of *qōnēh šāmayim wa-āreš*, which probably arose from the similar phrase *'ōšēh šāmayim wa-āreš*, very often used in the Psalms. H. G. May, "The Patriarchal Idea of God" (*JBL* 60 [1941] 118, n. 11), is hardly right in assigning an early date to Deut 32 and in accepting the meaning "to create" for *qny*. With Montgomery (in the two articles quoted above), I feel inclined to assume that *qnyt ('elm)* as an epithet of Aṭirat yam in the Ugarit poems is synonymous with *ba'alat*, and the same may apply to *qnyy 'el* in another poem.

² In all those passages, 'Elyon is but a poetic synonym of Yahweh. How much its popularity may have been favored by the recollection of the old Canaanite deity, I do not venture to guess. 'Elyon was also used as an adjective, and to call Yahweh "The Most High" must have appeared quite natural at a later stage of the Israelite religion.

'Elyon is preceded by El, besides Gen. 14 18–20, is Ps 78 35, where it parallels Elohim and obviously refers to Yahweh.³ This Psalm is certainly late, and we cannot escape the impression that in the choice of that unusual term its author was under the influence of the passage in Genesis.

Therefore no biblical parallel can be used in the attempt to understand the nature of El 'Elyon in Gen. 14. That he must have been an old Canaanite deity is assumed by all students who have dealt with this topic in recent years.⁴ If such were the case, and if the epithet of Lord of Heaven and Earth was steadily applied to him, he must have borne a universalistic character, far more outspoken than that of any other god in the same environment. The only point subject to further discussion would be the exact meaning of the first element in his double name. El 'Elyon might be, at least theoretically, "the god 'Elyon", or "El, who is 'Elyon".⁵ El, together with its expanded forms, is the appellation for "god" in all Semitic languages (with the exception of Ethiopic), but is also the specific name of an individual deity, of which the Ugarit texts afford a detailed, although not complete picture.⁶

³ In the same Psalm, we find 'Elyon (v. 17) and Elohim 'Elyon (v. 36): a further proof that we should not expect to find there the consciousness of Pre-Israelite beliefs; by using obsolete names at random, the author only aimed at a rhetorical effect.

⁴ See May's article (quoted in note 1) pp. 117–18; J. Lewy, *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 110 [1934] 50–64; W. F. Albright, *JBL* 54 [1935] 180; H. S. Nyberg, "Studien zum Religionskampf im Alten Testament. I. Der Gott 'Al: Belege und Bedeutung des Namens," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 35 [1938] 328–387; W. F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* (1940), p. 175.

⁵ See A. Alt, *Der Gott der Väter* (Beiträge zur Wiss. vom A. und N. T., III 12, 1929), p. 7, who considers the second term as a depending genitive: Albright, *JBL* 54 [1935] 180 calls it "an appositional genitive." According to Nyberg (*op. cit.*, 343), the name means "der hohe oder droben thronende Ilu."

⁶ See W. W. Baudissin, *Kyrios* (1929), III, 12–18, 128–140, 291–309. As is well known, before the discovery of the evidence offered by the Ugarit poems and the Suḡin inscription the only references to El as an individual divine name were Sanchuniathon (see below, n. 10) and a few other mentions in Greek, a few South Arabian inscriptions, the Old Aramaic Hadad and

However, more than a decade ago, the discovery of the Old Aramaic inscription of Suḡīn (Sefire), written in the second half of the eighth century B. C., has confronted us with the puzzling mention of El *and* 'Elyon as two distinct deities, whose names closely follow each other, and to which a third god, Šamēn, is attached.⁷ The striking contrast between this appellation and the unitarian terminology in Gen 14 has been pointed out by some scholars,⁸ but they failed to draw the necessary consequences. However, if El *and* 'Elyon are two separate deities, we understand much better a biblical passage, unquestionably old, namely Balaam's oracle in Nu 24 16, where the two names El and 'Elyon appear in parallelism. It should be clear now that they are not to be considered, as they used to be, as synonyms of Yahweh, but rather as two different, although related divine beings.⁹

The sequence El, 'Elyon, Šamēn in the Suḡīn inscription tallies exactly with the statement of Sanchunyathon¹⁰ about Elioun "who is called the Most High" ("Υψιστος) and who became the father of Epigeios ("the One who is above the earth"), called later Ouranos: the latter married his sister Gē (the earth)

Panammu inscriptions, and finally (if the reading is correct, which is more than doubtful) the Phoenician dedication first published by Clermont-Ganneau, *Recueil d'archéologie orientale* 5, 376 (cf. *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik* 2, 166).

⁷ Line 11. A complete bibliography of this inscription is given by F. Rosenthal, *Die Sprache der palmyrenischen Inschriften* (MVAG 41, 1. 1936), p. 5, n. 2; and *Die aramaistische Forschung* (1939), p. 13, n. 5.

⁸ J. A. Montgomery, *Harvard Theological Review* 31 [1938] 143-45, and especially Nyberg, *op. cit.*, p. 336: "'El and 'Iljān treten hier als getrennte aber dennoch sehr nahe verbundene Gottheiten" (cf. p. 343). See also C. Peters, *OLZ* 44 [1941] 265-68, where the wild attempt of A. Kuhn (*ZAW* 57 [1939] 150) to find 'Elyon in the Phoenician personal name Abdalonym(os) is properly disposed with.

⁹ This is partially admitted by Nyberg, p. 343. Ps 107 11, where El and 'Elyon also appear as parallel terms, seems to be a free quotation from the Balaam passage, as is evinced by the identical phrase *imrē ʾēl* and by *'aṣat 'elyōn*, which is reminiscent of *da'at 'elyōn*.

¹⁰ Eusebios, *Praep. Ev.* 1:10, 15-16 (last edition by C. Clemen, *Die phoenikische Religion nach Philo von Byblos* [MVAG 42, 3; 1939], p. 24-25).

and begot four sons, the first of whom was Ēlos, also called Kronos.¹¹

In this triad, the names and rôles of 'Elyon and Šamēm/Šamēn are clear: the former, through the transparent etymology of his name,¹² appears to have been thought of as the lord of the astral sky, the seat of sun, moon, and stars, whereas Šamēm probably was the god of the atmospheric or meteoric sky, where storms are formed. He would be, therefore, the same as Ba'al Šamēm-Hadad. As for El, he appears in Sanchunyathon in close connection with the earth, his mother: he is a founder of towns, and the father of the Titanids, the typical representatives of elemental earthly forces.¹³

Now an epigraphical document, which belongs to a much later date but undoubtedly reproduces a religious formula many centuries older, shows that El was actually recognized as the Lord of Earth, and had no connection whatever with Heaven. A Neo-Punic inscription from Leptis Magna in Tripolitania, which, although it was published sixteen years ago,¹⁴ has been

¹¹ The three gods and their genealogical relationship are the only features which we may confidently use for a better understanding of the old Canaanite religion. The rest of the story, with its euhemeristic tendency, is the result of a theological afterthought, for which I do not think that Philo of Byblos is responsible, but which should go back to Sanchunyathon himself. The trend towards unification and systematization of the scattered myths which were differently set up in the various cities of Phoenicia, exactly as it happened in Mesopotamia at a much earlier date, must have been a very early one, and probably was the consequence of the political unification of Phoenicia.

¹² Or rather, epithet. The god himself may have borne another, personal, name.

¹³ This Canaanite triad corresponds closely to the three chief gods of the early Sumerian religion: Anu, the starry sky; Enlil, the atmosphere; and Enki, the earth. The very name En-ki, furthermore, matches exactly the epithet *qōnēh ereš*, since it means The Lord of the earth. This may be accidental, but nevertheless is worth noting; see the new book by S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*. The results of the research upon which this work is based were presented by Dr. Kramer to the joint seminary of the Oriental Department of the University of Pennsylvania during the academic year 1941-42. Egzi'ab'ḥēr, the current Ethiopic term for God, means literally "the Lord of the Earth," and may go back to very old religious ideas.

¹⁴ *Libya* 3 [1927] 105-107. The translation and commentary given there should now be considered as obsolete and superseded.

overlooked both by investigators of Phoenician religion and Old Testament students,¹⁵ may be reproduced here for the sake of convenience:¹⁶

לארן לאל קן ארץ בנא ו 1
 איקדש ח עכסנדרע וח ערפת סח 2
 בחצאחם בחם קענדרא בן קענדרא 3
 בן חנא בן ברמלקרח כ שמע קלא ברכא 4

"To the Lord El, Lord of Earth,¹⁷ Candidus, son of Candidus, son of Hanno, son of Bodmelqart built and consecrated this exedra¹⁸ and this portico with their ornamentation¹⁹ at his own expense,²⁰ because he (i. e., El) heard his voice and blessed him."²¹

We possess here unquestionable evidence that the god El was worshiped in Phoenician North Africa²² and that his name was

¹⁵ Dussaud devoted a few words to it in *Syria* 8 [1927] 365. He used it only, however, in order to support an interpretation of קנמי (in lines 4 and 20 of the Eshmun'azar inscription [*Corpus Inscr. Sem.* 1, 3]) which, in my opinion, is far from being correct.

¹⁶ It was found near the amphiteater of Leptis, which has not yet been excavated: it is possible, therefore, that further information, both archaeological and epigraphical, may be made available in the future. The inscription probably belongs to the beginning of the second century A. D., as is evidenced not only from paleography (a rather uncertain criterion, at least for the time being) but especially from the fact that both the dedicator and his father bear Roman names. This custom became general in Leptis Magna about the middle of the first century A. D.

¹⁷ As is shown by the text, the first "Lord" is a translation of Phoenician 'dn, and the second of qn.

¹⁸ The epenthesis of *n* in 'ksndr' is an uncommon feature, which probably goes back to a peculiar Latin pronunciation, although I do not know any other example of it. Extensive evidence about epenthetic *n* in Latin and Greek has been assembled by W. Schulze, "Samstag" (*Zeitschr. f. vergl. Sprachforschung* 33 [1893-95]), as Professor Bonfante of Princeton University kindly informed me.

¹⁹ Literally, "their external parts" (from the root יצא): see *Atti della R. Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 70 [1935] 191.

²⁰ This meaning of *btm* (literally, "completely") is made sure by its appearance in a bilingual inscription (*Africa Italiana* 6 [1935-38] 107), where it corresponds to *de sua pecunia* of the Latin text.

²¹ This formula is common in Phoenician and Punic votary inscriptions.

²² No other Neo-Punic inscription from Leptis Magna contains divine names, except one, a bilingual where the god Šdrp' corresponds to the Latin *Liber*

accompanied by an epithet which corresponds literally to the epithet given in Gen 14 to El 'Elyon: however, without the mention of heaven and 'Elyon.

The inscription from Leptis Magna agrees with Sanchunyathon in as much as it links El to the earth. What we learn about El's character from the Ugarit poems (the evidence is rather confused, due to the poetical style and the fragmentary condition of those texts) seems to confirm his aspect of a god who possesses and governs the earth, and whose command spreads over the mountains, the rivers, the springs, and even over the underground waters, from which, according to an ancient belief which can be traced back to Sumerian cosmology and goes down to the Middle Ages,²³ the sea originates.²⁴ The connection of El with the primeval sea explains why in the Ugarit texts his wife is "Aṭirat of the Sea," and why in the Hellenistic age he was identified not only with Kronos but also with Poseidon.²⁵ Of course, we ought not to take those identifications too literally:

Pater (BASOR, no. 87, October 1942, 31). Since the chief deities of Leptis, in the Roman rendering of the old Phoenician names, were Liber and Hercules (see P. Romanelli, *Leptis Magna* (1925), pp. 17 and 26-27), the latter may have been identical with El (but see below, n. 36).

²³ See *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 3 (1910) 25, n. 3, and 28. What is said there is inadequate in view of the immense amount of evidence which might be gathered on that topic.

²⁴ See H. Bauer, ZAW 51 (1933) 84; J. Pedersen, "Canaanite and Israelite Cultus," *Acta Orientalia*, 18 (1939) 4; Albright, *JBL* 59 (1940) 106, and *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (1942), p. 172 (I cannot share Albright's assumption that El parallels the Babylonian Anu and the Egyptian Rē' as god of heaven), etc. I refrain from discussing how the term Lord of the Earth, *ba'al 'arṣ*, may have passed from El to 'Al'eyan and Ba'al in the two poems from Ugarit where they are the central figures. It may be an example of transferred attributes, a quite common feature in religious phenomenology. Incidentally, I should call attention upon the fact that the heavenly character of 'Elyon speaks against his identification with 'Al'eyan, which is maintained by Albright (*JPOS*, 12 [1932] 190), Bauer (p. 96 of the article quoted in this footnote), and, although less outspokenly, by O. Eissfeldt (*Ras Shamra und Sanchunyathon* [1939], p. 114-15).

²⁵ We ought to remember that also in Greek religion and mythology (as has long been recognized) Poseidon is not exclusively nor originally the god of the sea: more correctly, he is the god of the depths of earth, whence the sea originates.

they often depend only upon external and superficial analogies, and sometimes are quite inconsistent.²⁶ However, there is little doubt that Kronos and Poseidon have been identified in North Africa, undoubtedly because they both represented the same Phoenician deity.²⁷

As has long been recognized, the Poseidon of Berytos is probably El.²⁸ Although we do not know exactly who the Tyrian Melqart actually was,²⁹ I would provisionally assume that he may have been El, or, as it were, one of his "hypostatic" aspects. Or else, he may have paralleled Ba'al and 'Al'eyan of the Ugarit poems, which would better fit his later identification with Herakles, the fighting hero. Be that as it may, if at Tyre he became hellenized under the name of Herakles, and his worship and fame spread widely over the Mediterranean together with the expanding of Phoenician trade and colonisation, at Narnaka in Cyprus he seems to have been worshiped under the aspect of Poseidon.³⁰

It is of course impossible to make out which was the Semitic background of the great god of Gerasa, who in Greek inscriptions

²⁶ There is no doubt, e. g., that Kronos and Poseidon represent two different Phoenician gods in Philo's translation from Sanchunyathon (2:10, 35 = Clemens, p. 30; and cf. Eissfeldt, *Ras Schamra und Sanchunythos*, pp. 140-43).

²⁷ J. F. Toutain, *Les cultes païens dans l'Empire Romain* (1907-20), pp. 3, 25.

²⁸ M.-J. Lagrange, *Études sur les religions sémitiques*, 2d ed. (1907), p. 436 (cf. W. W. Baudissin, *Adonis und Ešmun* (1911), p. 234). If Eissfeldt is right (*Ras Schamra*, pp. 128 ff., 144), he would be the same as 'Al'eyan Ba'al of Ugarit, and the story of Dionysos' and Poseidon's fight for the supremacy over Berytos in Nonnons' *Dionysiaca* would be a late offspring of the Ugaritic myth. However, we saw above that 'Al'eyan, called *zbl B'l 'arš* and *zbl ym*, has borrowed some of the features typical of El.

²⁹ I agree with Albright (*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, pp. 81 and 196, n. 29; and *BASOR* no. 87, October 1942, p. 29; and no. 90, April 1943, p. 32) that Melqart is a cosmic deity. However, I do not see why the element *-qart* in his name should not refer to Tyre. It is clear to me that Melqart was but the local form of one of the great gods of the Phoenician pantheon (see *BASOR*, no. 90, April 1943, p. 30). Should Albright be right in his contention that *-qart* is the city of the dead, *mlk qrt* would perfectly parallel *qn 'rš*, the only difference being that the stress would be on the dominion upon the depths of the earth rather than upon its surface.

³⁰ A. M. Honeyman, *Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 26 [1941] 63, n. 3.

bears the compound name Zeus Poseidon and the epithets *ἑνὸς ἰχθῶν*³¹ and *σωτήρ*,³² but it would seem likely to see in him another instance of El the Lord of Earth.³³ If I am not totally mistaken, we possess another epigraphical evidence of the identification of Poseidon not only with El but actually with El *qōnēh ereš*. A recently published bilingual inscription from Palmyra,³⁴ dated June 39 A. D., bears in its Greek part a dedication to "the god Poseidon," *Ποσειδῶνι Θεῷ*(ι). The corresponding name in the Palmyrene part was spelled by Cantineau אלקונרע: however, he did not attempt to explain it. I would suggest to read ארע(א) קן אל,³⁵ which would make the exact counterpart of the אל קן ארץ of Leptis Magna.³⁶

To sum up: the Suḡin inscription proves that El and 'Elyon were two separate gods, and from the Leptis Magna inscription we gain the evidence of the worship of "*El qōnēh ereš*."³⁷ What

³¹ Enosichton is a common epithet of Poseidon in Greek religion. However, since it refers to the chthonic rather than to the thalassian aspect of the god, it seems to imply here an analogy with the main feature of El.

³² C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (1938), pp. 392-93, n. 39 (cf. Eissfeldt, *Tempel und Kulte syrischer Städte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* [Der Alte Orient, 40, 1941], p. 30).

³³ It is also impossible to give a proper identification of the Poseidon mentioned together with Ares and Triton in the treaty between Hannibal and Philip of Macedonia in Polybios, 7:9.

³⁴ J. Cantineau, "Tadmorea. No. 31: Un Poséidon palmyrénien," (*Syria* 19 [1938] 78-79).

³⁵ From Cantineau's drawing of the inscription we receive the impression that the writing is somewhat blurred: a fresh examination of the stone may improve the reading (as was admitted by Cantineau himself in a letter which he wrote me in 1938 or 1939). Of course, א and א are identical in the Palmyrene script when they are not individualized by a diacritical point.

³⁶ Another fragmentary bilingual inscription, Latin and Neo-Punic, from the market place at Leptis Magna, bears in its Latin text the word *Neptu[no]*. Unfortunately, the Neo-Punic part is so badly damaged, that nothing can be made out of it. Since one of the chief deities of Leptis was Hercules (see above, n. 22), we are unable to decide whether 'לqn'rš was represented in Latin by him or by Neptun.

³⁷ The Hebrew name *Ēlqānāh* is another proof of the worship, or at least the knowledge, of 'el *qōnēh ereš* among the Israelites. Noth's assumption (*Di israel. Personennamen*, p. 172), that *qānāh* undoubtedly means "to create," is wholly unjustified.

we know about the Canaanite god El points towards his connection with earth, not with heaven. On the other hand, the celestial character of 'Elyon needs no demonstration.

The conclusion in regard to the passage in Genesis 14 is self evident. El 'Elyon, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, corresponds to no actual deity in the Canaanite pantheon. He has been artificially set up through the combination of El the Lord of Earth with 'Elyon the Lord of Heaven. In other words, he is the result of theological speculation. The author of the story in which the fateful meeting of Melchizedek the priest king of Salem with Abraham the Hebrew is related in solemn words, wanted to emphasize the identity of the former's god with the universalistic god of the latter, to whom the epithet of "God of Heaven and Earth" had been applied (Gen 24 3 [and also 7 according to the Septuagint]: the passage is generally acknowledged to belong to J). In order to reach this aim, he boldly merged two of the chief gods of the Canaanite pantheon into one being, which, together with the Creator of Heaven and Earth of Gen 1, represents the closest approach to monotheism throughout the whole book of Genesis.

I will not venture to discuss the personality nor the age of the author whom we must credit with this definite step towards monotheism.³⁸ The purpose of the above remarks is only to contribute some fresh evidence to the study of one of the most controversial passages in the book of Genesis. The writer gladly leaves the task of solving the manifold problems which it offers to the specialized students of the Old Testament, to whose number he does not claim to belong.

³⁸ Nyberg's attempt (in the article quoted above, n. 4) to prove that Gen 14 is contemporary with David and is a kind of manifesto in favor of his claim for the possession of Jerusalem is appealing, but too bold to be accepted without great reserve.