

The Antiquity of the Divine Title אֱלֹהִים in Gen. xiv.

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IT is well known that two very divergent views are held in regard to the date of origin and the historical value of Gen. 14. Nöldeke¹ submitted it to the most scrutinizing criticism in 1869, and since that day most literary critics have followed in his footsteps. According to him it was written with a *tendency* to glorify Abraham and to surround him with a halo of military renown; it gives the impression of being exact history, because it deals with the names of kings, localities, and historical events, while in reality these names are inventions and forgeries.

Cornill² takes the same view, and sums up his estimate by saying: "We have in Gen. 14 a late supplement to an already completed Pentateuch after the manner of the Midrash and Chronicles. Its tendency comes to light clearly in the Melchizedek episode."

On the other hand, the historian Ewald³ considered it a fragment of some very ancient historical work; and Kittel⁴ agrees with him, regarding it as an ancient Canaanitish document which had its origin in priestly circles of pre-Israelitish days. The Assyriologists,⁵ almost without exception, put a high estimate on the historical value of the chapter; and many of them go so far as to identify the names of the kings of v.¹ with some that have been found on the monuments.

It is not the design of this paper to discuss all the *pros* and *cons* which have been advanced by the protagonists of these views. Apart from purely subjective considerations, the criteria for relegating the chapter to the exile are not many. One that has been put forward

¹ Nöldeke, *Untersuchungen z. Kritik d. Alten Testaments*, p. 156 ff.

² Cornill, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, p. 65.

³ Ewald, *History of Israel*, vol. i. p. 321 (Eng. trans.).

⁴ Kittel, *Geschichte der Hebräer*, p. 158 ff.

⁵ Schrader, *SBAW*. 1887, p. 600 ff.; Lyon, *Bib. World*, vol. vii. pp. 425-437; Jastrow, *JQR.*, Oct. 1900, p. 42.

with a considerable degree of plausibility is the use of the divine title אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים by the heathen king of Jerusalem. It has been maintained that it is at least an anachronism in his mouth, that the pious Jew of the exile did not care to put the divine name Yahweh into a formula uttered by a gentile, and consequently used a circumlocution. Holzinger,⁶ in his *Commentary on Genesis*, which is the latest that has appeared on this book, emphasizes the significance of this divine title as a criterion of the post-exilic origin of the chapter. The chief prop for his theory is the fact that the Maccabees bore the title ἀρχιερέως θεοῦ ὑψίστου, and the two proof texts cited are: Josephus, *Ant.* XV. chap. 6, § 2 (the book should be XVI.), and the Assumption of Moses 6¹. A careful examination shows that these passages lend a very frail support to Holzinger's theory. The reading of the second passage is extremely doubtful. Fritzsche's⁷ text runs, "et qui sacerdotes summi dei vocabuntur;" and if this text be accepted, the adjective may be regarded as agreeing with *sacerdotes*, and consequently the translation would be, "who will name themselves high priests of God." Clemen⁸ reads *summos* instead of *summi*, and renders, "und werden zu Hohenpriestern Gottes berufen werden." The citation from Josephus runs ἐπὶ Ὑρκανοῦ ἀρχιερέως θεοῦ ὑψίστου; and is found in an imperial Roman letter, which is scarcely the place to go for distinctly Jewish ideas. A verse which at best is ambiguous and the letter of a Roman emperor furnish rather doubtful evidence for the late origin of El Elyon.

The least satisfactory attempt to prove the antiquity of this divine title is the one made by Sayce⁹ and Hommel¹⁰ to connect it with *sarru dannu*. In the Tell-el-Amarna letters (Berlin, Nos. 102 and 103) Ebed-Tob (Sayce), or Abd-khiba (Hommel), the Prefect of Jerusalem, makes the statement that he had not inherited his kingly throne, but that the arm of the "mighty king" gave it to him. The same phrase occurs in another letter, where it is used by the same personage. Sayce regards *sarru dannu* as the name of a deity, and

⁶ Holzinger, *Genesis (Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament)*, p. 145.

After this paper was prepared Gunkel's *Commentar* appeared (*Hund-Commentar zum Alten Testament*). Gunkel thinks that El Elyon is a very ancient appellative, cf. p. 260.

⁷ Fritzsche, *Libri Apocryphi Veteris Testamenti Graece*, p. 711. The MS. reads *in* for *qui*.

⁸ Clemen, *Himmelfahrt Moses*, in Kautzsch, *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments*, vol. ii. p. 324.

⁹ Sayce, *Expository Times*, vol. vii. p. 478.

¹⁰ Hommel, *The Ancient Hebrew Tradition*, p. 156.

remarks, "Ebed-Tob is careful to distinguish between the King of Egypt and the Mighty King." This is not conclusive, for even a cursory examination of the Tell-el-Amarna letters reveals that the titles of the Egyptian kings are many. Hommel is more judicious in his view; he considers *sarru dannu* the title of an earthly potentate, preferably the great king of the Khati; but he goes further, adding that it "sounds for all the world like the echo of some ancient sacred formula, or of a phrase that originally possessed a religious significance." To the Egyptian king the phrase "the arm of the mighty king" signified the power of his rival, the Khati monarch, but in Jerusalem every one would regard it as equivalent to אל עליון. This reasoning is not very cogent, as the context of the Tell-el-Amarna letters most certainly points to an earthly monarch. In view of this visionary character of the views of Sayce and Hommel it seems strange that the article on "El Elyon" in Hastings' Bible Dictionary¹¹ should contain little else than a presentation of the problematical ideas of these two scholars on this title of deity.

So far the heart of the question has not been reached. Since the day that Nöldeke asserted that El Elyon was synonymous with Yahweh, literary critics seem to have followed him without any thoroughgoing investigation. At any rate this position puts the question very clearly before us. This divine title is either a circumlocution for Yahweh and is specifically Israelitish in its origin, and hence, if not an anachronism, is yet historically impossible in the mouth of Melchizedek; or, on the other hand, the idea of El Elyon, if not the name itself, was common to many Semitic peoples, and consequently its use in the passage under consideration does no violence to historical perspective.

If the facts are passed in review, it will be quite evident that the latter view is more probable, and that it answers all the requirements of the historical situation. The word אל by itself would cause no trouble, for, although it is an etymological martyr, yet it is universally recognized as the appellative which was used by the Semites long before they split up into Arabs, Hebrews, Aramæans, and Assyrians. Consequently, the battle rages about the word עליון and the idea of a "Most High God" which the expression as a whole conveys.

If this were the only passage of the Old Testament in which the word Elyon occurred, there would be reasonable grounds for suspecting it to be a circumlocution for Yahweh which is credited to

¹¹ Hastings, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. i. p. 682.

Melchizedek for obvious reasons. In many passages it is certainly synonymous with the name peculiar to Israel's God, e.g. Ps. 7¹⁸ 47³ 83¹⁹ 91⁹ 92² 97⁹. This, however, does not exhaust its uses, as it is found in one of the members of a synonymous parallelism equivalent to designations of deity which are generally conceded to be very ancient and not specifically Israelitish. In Num. 24¹⁶ it is parallel to אֱלֹהִים, and hence equivalent to the most ancient and general term for god found in the Semitic languages. The full force of this is felt only when it is remembered that Num. 24¹⁶ is considered a part of J (Kuen. 24¹⁶ E), cf. Ps. 107¹¹; and it occurs once, Ps. 91¹, as a synonym of אֱלֹהִים, another ancient appellation of deity. From this it is apparent that the Old Testament usage of the word Elyon does not limit its meaning to a circumlocution for Yahweh. Considerable light is thrown upon the signification and use of this word in Ps. 83, where the Psalmist prays that the nations surrounding Israel may be vanquished and punished. The purpose of this overthrow and subjugation of Israel's neighbors is that they may learn the position of Yahweh as אֱלֹהִים¹² over the whole earth. It would be impossible for the tribes mentioned in Ps. 83⁶⁻⁹ to appreciate such a sentiment, unless they accorded to one of their own gods a position above all the others, and possessed the idea if not the name El Elyon.

This inference, drawn from the language of this psalm, is supported by facts drawn from the religious ideas of various branches of the Semitic family. This divine title has not been found on the cuneiform inscriptions, but Assyriologists very generally acknowledge that the idea was current in every period of Babylonian and Assyrian history. Delitzsch,¹³ in speaking of the names for deity employed by the Sumerian inhabitants of Babylonia, remarks of *ilá(ili)i* that from their primary meaning of 'lofty' or 'exalted,' they came to signify in the oldest pantheon 'god most high' (*den höchsten Gott*). Professor Morris Jastrow, Jr.,¹⁴ expresses himself in the same strain. En-lil or Bel of Nippur occupies a position of lord *par excellence* at the head of the ancient Babylonian pantheon. In the days of Hammurabi this rôle is usurped by Marduk of Babylon, and "such are the endearing terms in which he speaks of his god, as to give one the impression that, when thinking of Marduk, the king for the moment loses sight of the other gods." Likewise in the Assyrian

¹² Halévy has found this divine title in a Nabatean proper name אֱלֹהִים, in which אֱלֹהִים is an equivalent of אֱלֹהִים, *Journal Asiatique*, VII. Ser. tome. xix. p. 482.

¹³ Fr. Delitzsch, *Wo lag das Paradies?* pp. 163, 164.

¹⁴ Jastrow, *Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, pp. 53, 117, 192.

pantheon Ashur was supreme among the gods. The other gods are "little Ashurs, as it were, by the side of the great one."

The pre-Islamic religion of the Arabs does not throw much light on the question, for Allah, owing to the decay of tribal deities, is already supreme in the poems which are the chief sources of our information. These poems, no doubt, underwent a redaction after the rise of Islam, and consequently their testimony must be used with great caution. Notwithstanding these facts Wellhausen¹⁵ is of the opinion that not only the Arabs but the Semites in general believed that their gods had a chief who was lord of the heavens.

The evidence furnished by the Phoenician religion is more precise and exact. The Phoenicians not only had the idea but also the very title. In order to prove this it is not necessary to recount at length the theogony of Philo Byblus found in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius¹⁶; the testimony of this work may be accepted without hesitation, for it is no longer regarded as a creation of the author, but as a presentation of Phoenician cosmogony and theogony on the basis of very ancient legends.¹⁷ According to the legend, as given by Eusebius, there dwelt in the country about Byblus, one Ἐλιῶν καλούμενος Ὑψιστος and his wife Βηρούθ, by whom he had a numerous progeny. In the course of time this Ἐλιῶν lost his life among the wild animals and was accorded a place among the gods. The LXX. translation of עֵלִיִּן by ὕψιστος leaves no doubt that in this euhemeristic legend there is an echo of the divine title El Elyon. From other sources it may be learned that the Phoenicians accorded to one of their deities a position of honor at the head of their pantheon. This deity was El, or Bel, or Belitan, or the ancient Bel, who was identical with the Greek Kronos or Latin Saturn, and was generally identified by the Phoenicians with the planet Saturn. Movers¹⁸ thinks that this El or Bel is none other than the El Elyon of Melchizedek.

Furthermore, it has been maintained that this title is monotheistic; and, consequently, in accordance with prevalent views on the religion of the Hebrews, it must have been coined in the exilic period. There is, however, no monotheistic tinge to the term, but rather a superlative idea, which can be present only in case of a comparison between a plurality of gods.¹⁹ The word Elyon reflects polytheism — gods

¹⁵ Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, p. 209.

¹⁶ Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, ed. Dindorf, I. 10¹⁴.

¹⁷ Wachsmuth, *Einleitung in das Studium der alten Geschichte*, p. 406.

¹⁸ Movers, *Die Phönizier*, vol. i. p. 313.

¹⁹ Cf. Baethgen, *Beiträge zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, p. 291 ff.

many and lords many. This exegesis of the word עֲלִיּוֹן is supported by its use in Dt. 26¹⁹ 28¹, where it expresses the superiority of the Israelites over all the nations of the earth.

In like manner, the theology of the expression אֱלֹהֵי קִנְיָהּ has been regarded late rather than primitive. The phrase is to be translated 'creator ('maker,' R.V. marg.) of heaven and earth.' Holzinger²⁰ maintains that קִנְיָהּ is equivalent to בְּרָא only in a late stratum of the language, and to support his view cites Dt. 32⁶ Ps. 139¹³ Prov. 8²². This merely testifies to the late use of the word, and does not exclude it from the vocabulary of early times. The conception of Yahweh as creator of heaven and earth is anything but modern. In Gen. 2^{4b} the creative act is referred to Him in very distinct terms, "in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven." Holzinger²⁰ assigns this portion of the verse to J¹, which he himself does not put down in the exilic period. The modern school of literary critics are agreed in regarding Jud. 5 as the oldest monument of Hebrew literature extant,²¹ and in that ancient song Yahweh is the possessor and ruler of the heavens and earth, for in that national crisis the stars in their courses fought for Him and His cause. Such a view is not specifically Israelitish, but is duplicated by Babylonian ideas; they ascribed the creation of the universe to their gods. In the so-called 'Creation Epic,' which has been also termed 'The Epic of Marduk,' this god is creator of the world, and brings order out of chaos and light out of darkness.²²

In view of all these facts the antiquity of this divine title can scarcely be questioned; if ancient, and not specifically Israelitish, it is not an anachronism doing violence to historical perspective. If, therefore, it can be correctly ascribed to Melchizedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem in the age of Abraham, taken as a criterion of date, it does not conflict with a very early origin for this much-discussed and controverted chapter.

²⁰ Holzinger, *Genesis (Kurzer Hand-Commentar z. Alten Testament)*, pp. xxv, 145.

²¹ Cornill, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, p. 345.

²² Fell, *ZDMG*. 1900, p. 258, points out that many Sabaeen deities have the epithet רִשְׁמוֹן, which certainly recalls the phrase under discussion.