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Some Notes on the Use of אֱל in Genesis

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THERE are eighteen occurrences of the word אֱל in Genesis, omitting 35 7 (with LXX, Luc., and Vulg.), and reading אֱל for אֱל in 49 25 (with LXX, Luc., 3 Mss., Sam., and Syr.). It occurs five times with the article, either simply (31 13 and 46 3, both E), or with a preposition (35 1 E and 49 25 J). Of the thirteen remaining instances, one is the אֱל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 33 20 (E), with which may be compared the אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל Jos. 8 30. The others are all in the epithetical combinations, אֱל עֲלִיּוֹן (14 18. 19. 20. 22), אֱל רֵאִי (16 13 J), אֱל שְׂדֵי (17 1 28 3 35 11 48 3, all P, 43 14 E, and 49 25 J), and אֱל עוֹלָם (21 33 J). All but four of these instances are from Preprophetic writings, and generally admitted to be based upon very old, possibly Premosaic, traditions, and the four uses of אֱל שְׂדֵי in P are confirmed by both J and E, and therefore probably from a similarly old tradition. For the sake of simplicity I shall not translate the term at present, but shall content myself with the simple transcription of the Hebrew letters, El.

We have here to do with a common Semitic word, which appears also in Phœnician, in Aramaic, in Assyrian, and in Arabic. To the present writer it appears certain that it had a wide use in the early Hebrew traditions, and that the

recorders of those traditions, J, E, and P, intentionally, and for theological reasons, substituted the יְהוָה or אֱלֹהִים for an original reading אֵל. It is the oldest Semitic term for "deity," "divinity," and, as such, was applied to the numina which were believed to frequent the ancient sacred stones, trees, and springs. But, even in Premosaic times, it connoted far more than the idea of the local numen, and the writers of the prophetic schools J and E saw in it merely a synonym of יְהוָה or אֱלֹהִים, which they constantly used.

In 35 1 (E) Jacob is commanded to go to Bethel and build an altar לְאֵל הַנִּרְאָה אֵלַיךְ, "to the El who appeared to thee," and in v. 3 he proposes to obey the command, and to build an altar לְאֵל הַעֲנָה אֶתִּי, "to the El who answers me," while in 31 13 (E) he is described as recording the words of a vision אֲנִי הָאֵל בֵּית אֵל, "I am the El, Beth-el," or "I am the El at Bethel." The LXX translators, as well as the Targums (Onkelos and Jonathan), realizing the impossibility of the article with a word in the construct, and knowing nothing of the possibility of Beth-el as a possible proper name of a divinity, read אֲנִי הָאֵל הַנִּרְאָה אֵלַיךְ בֵּית אֵל. The reference is plainly to the Bethel vision recorded by both J and E, whose records are combined in 28 11-22. There is a general unanimity of opinion in the assignment of these verses to their respective sources, and, for our purpose, the accepted division serves all needs. To J belong vv. 10. 13-16, 19 and 21 b; vv. 11-12. 17-18. 21 a and 22 belong to E.

The two accounts agree in the following points:

- 1) That Jacob accidentally chose the spot as a place in which to spend the night.
- 2) That, while he was sleeping, some sort of theophany occurred there as an entire surprise to him.
- 3) That, accordingly, he termed the place a "Beth-el."

In J all reference to the stone or to the ladder is omitted, and it is Jahweh himself, and not one of his angels, who appears to the sleeping wanderer. But the passage looks as if the writer had taken an old tradition and intentionally omitted parts, and, instead of the אֵל which belonged to the original, used the name יְהוָה, excepting in the name of the

place, where it would be obviously impossible in a narrative that purported to give the etymology of the famous shrine Bethel. Accordingly Jacob is made to say that because Jahweh was in the place, and he was unconscious of the fact, he would call the place "Beth-el," which is something of a *non sequitur*. This difficulty, as well as the linguistic awkwardness of v. 16 is removed if, instead of **יש ידוה במקום הוה**, we read **יש אל במקום הוה**.

On the other hand, E has omitted none of the old tradition, mentioning even the anointing of the stone, but the intimate association of God with the stone, or with the place, as in J, was contradictory to his theological conceptions, that the dwelling place of God was in heaven, and he has therefore altered the tradition to keep it in harmony with that notion. It is not God himself, but his angels, which E records as appearing to the wanderer. However, he neglects to make this change in his reference to the story in 35 1, which preserves, not only the tradition of the theophany, but even the original word אֱל, instead of the later plural אֱלֹהִים. It would seem that the original tradition underlying this passage was that of the appearance of an El at a sacred stone.

The same result appears from a study of the flight of Hagar (16 1-14, all J except 9-10 E). Hagar flees from Sarai, and the מלאך ידוה finds her by משפט עין משפט. He tells her she is pregnant, and promises a future for her son, adding **וקראת שמו ישמעאל כי שמע ידוה אל עניך**. The story continues by saying **ותקרא שם ידוה הדבר אליה אתה אל ראי**. From the form of v. 11 we should expect the name ישמעידו, but, if we substitute אֱל for ידוה, the verse reads readily enough. Again, it is the מלאך who addresses Hagar, but in v. 11 it appears that the divinity himself had spoken. The suggested emendation is to supply, as the original reading, **וימצאה אל** for מלאך ידוה in vv. 7 and 11. Finally, the word ימצאה is out of place. It is the only connection of this word with ידוה. The most natural word to be expected, whether we use אֱל or ידוה as the subject, is יָרָא. Likewise, in v. 13, instead of the very late Qal participle הדבר, we should

expect הגראה. The emended verses, then, would read
 וירא אליה האל (7) ויאמר לה האל (11)
 וקראת שמו ישמעאל כי שמע האל אל עניך: (13) ותקרא שם
 האל הגראה אליה אתה אל ראי

The ידוה of 17 1 (P) is evidently a later interpolation. Another subject stood in this place in the original document which was used by P. If that subject had been the word usually used by P, there would be little reason for the change. If, however, the subject was האל, we have another instance of a stereotyped form, וירא האל, with which narratives of theophanies were wont to begin in the ancient traditions. My suggestion is that there was such a form, and that in J this was regularly changed to ידוה or ידוה, while in E it naturally became אלהים (12 7 18 1 26 2. א 35 9 46 29).

Into the etymologies of the epithets compounded from I cannot enter here. In general, they describe some activity, physical or moral, of the El. More important is the question whether they are the names of separate and individual deities, or whether they are different appellatives of the same deity, or, in other words, whether there was a common deity worshiped by the Israelite tribes, or the Semitic ancestors of those tribes, in Pre-mosaic times.

In the so-called "blessing of Jacob" (chap. 49), there occurs in the address to the tribe of Joseph (v. 28) the expression האל אביך, which is paralleled, according to the emended reading, with אל שדי. In the dream of 46 3 (E) the deity is represented as saying אנוכי האל אלהי אביך. This verse may be regarded in one of two ways. It may be considered as a fuller form of אנוכי אל אביך, thus probably paralleled with the expression "God of the fathers," which occurs in all the Pre-exilic documents of the Pentateuch (Ex. 3 6 E, 4 5 J, and often in the prefatory and concluding chapters of Deuteronomy). On the other hand, האל may be considered as a proper name, and אלהי אביך as an attributive clause.