

Messianic ideal was evolved not in terms of an abstract ideological formula of kingship (there never was such a formula) but with reference to a concrete historical prototype—a king, David. It was the significance which later generations saw in the figures of David, and, to a lesser extent, of Solomon and Josiah, that determined, far more than any ideological considerations, the form of the Messianic hope.

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### THE MOST HIGH GOD OF GENESIS 14:18-20

Authors writing on Melchisedech generally remark on the mystery which surrounds this contemporary of Abraham. This is not surprising since his appearances in Holy Scripture are few, brief and mysterious, and apart from the little that we learn of him from the Bible we know nothing about him. His first appearance in the Biblical narrative is abrupt and dramatic (Gen. 14:18-20); he is a Canaanite priest-king of Salem, who comes forth to salute Abraham returning from his victory over the Oriental kings. Abraham receives his blessing and pays him tithes, thereby acknowledging the legitimacy of his priesthood despite the fact that Melchisedech is a Canaanite. Only twice more do we meet Melchisedech in the Bible: in Ps. 109 (110):4 and in the Epistle to the Hebrews 5-7, presented unexpectedly as type and figure of the supreme High Priest and King.

Various questions might be discussed about Melchisedech, but perhaps the most intriguing for Old Testament scholars is the title under which he worshipped God. In Gen. 14:18 we are told that 'he was a priest of Most High God' ('*El 'Elyon*'). Genesis obviously understands '*El 'Elyon*' as a title of the one true God. Yet Melchisedech did not belong to the clan of Abraham, nor did he, as far as we know, receive a special revelation from God, and consequently we should have expected him to have been a worshipper of some pagan deity, living as he was in a well-attested polytheistic environment. Moreover '*El 'Elyon*' as a title for God occurs only once more in the Old Testament, in Ps. 77 (78):35 and perhaps the author of it was influenced in his choice of that title by Gen. 14. Abraham, however, recognised Melchisedech as a priest of God; otherwise he would not have paid his respects to him. '*El 'Elyon*' therefore would appear to be '*El*', the name by which the patriarchs designated God, called here '*Elyon*', the Highest.

Most critics would not agree with this. It is true that in extra-biblical documents 'El and 'Elyon appear as two quite distinct deities; for example on a stele discovered near Aleppo (dating from the 8th century B.C.) we read *qdm 'el w'alyan*—before 'El and 'Elyon.<sup>1</sup> They were polytheistic deities, and consequently it is not surprising to meet the assertion that Melchisedech was the worshipper of 'Elyon (or some other deity) and that the author of the narrative in Genesis is guilty of tendentious assimilation and syncretism.

Before dealing with this assertion, however, some preliminary investigation of these two deities is necessary. In the Ugarit documents 'El presides (at least in theory) over the West Semitic pantheon. He is considered the 'wise, the judge and the king'; he is the great god of Canaan, which is the 'land of 'El.' Everything is subject to him, even the other gods (the 'sons of 'El'), and nothing takes place without his consent.<sup>2</sup> Among the numerous titles which indicate his pre-eminence in the pantheon, those which are reminiscent of the title of 'El 'Elyon in Gen. 14:19 'maker of heaven and earth' are 'Creator of creatures,'<sup>3</sup> 'our Creator 'El,'<sup>4</sup> and 'Father (i.e. Creator) of man.'<sup>5</sup> Another inscription discovered at Karatepe in Cilicia has 'El, creator of earth.'<sup>6</sup>

We know also that 'El was the name used by the patriarchs to designate God (cf. e.g. Gen. 33:20; 46:1-6). It is the oldest name applied to God since it appears only in those texts recognised as the oldest—except where it is used anachronistically. Nevertheless it would be erroneous to assume that the patriarchs borrowed either the name or conception of 'El from the Canaanites who were settled in Palestine on their arrival. Equally erroneous would be the assumption that the pantheon at Ugarit reflected the 'primitive religion' of the Semites. 'El was the name used by all Semitic peoples (with the exception of the Ethiopians) for 'God,' and therefore would appear to go back to the time before the Semites split up into their various

<sup>1</sup> cf. P. S. Ronzevalle, *Mélanges de l'Université de St. Joseph*, 1931, p. 237. Also Pirot-Clamer, *Genèse*, pp. 95 and 258; Levi della Vida, 'El 'Elyon in Genesis 14, 18-20,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXIII, 1944, pp. 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 72; *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 231f.; *JBL*, XLIX, 1940, p. 106. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, p. 106. R. Dussaud, *Les Découvertes de Ras-Shamra et l'Ancien Testament*, pp. 67-8; *Les Religions des Hittites et des Hourrites, des Phéniciens et des Syriens*, p. 360. E. Dhorme, *La Religion des Hébreux Nomades*, pp. 335f. J. W. Jack, *The Ras-Shamra Tablets. Their bearing on the Old Testament*, p. 14. R. Follet, 'El in alveo duarum aquarum,' *VD*, xxxiv, 1956, pp. 28f.

<sup>3</sup> Virouilleaud, *La Légende Phénicienne de Danel*, pp. 102 and 192; *Syria*, 1932, plate xxv, col. 2, line 11, p. 121. W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and Religion of Palestine*, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> H. G. May, 'Patriarchal Idea of God,' *JBL*, LX, 1941, p. 114

<sup>5</sup> Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 'Legend of King Keret,' *KRT*, A, line 35

<sup>6</sup> J. Starcky, *Cahiers Sioniens*, June 1951, p. 25 (117)

nations and tribes, i.e. to at least the fourth millenium. By the time of Ugarit (middle of the second millenium) the 'nature' of 'El (like that of the other gods) had evolved considerably, even though he still remained the head of the pantheon.

In the cuneiform texts of the third millenium 'El appears in the Accadic form of *il* or *ilu*.<sup>1</sup> The etymology is still disputed but probably it is derived from the root 'wl or 'yl, which expresses the idea of 'power, primacy or strong' (*dunamis*).<sup>2</sup> Whether or not *il* or *ilu* was used as a proper name by the Assyro-Babylonians is uncertain. Lagrange was of the opinion that it was, being applied to the supreme god of the Semites who were originally monotheistic.<sup>3</sup> Others maintain that the Ugarit texts are the first in which it appears as a proper name, before which it was purely appellative. At first it probably was an appellative used like *theos* in Greek or *deus* in Latin, having a masculine, feminine and plural and was applied to gods and goddesses alike. However, since the Semites considered *Il* as distinct and superior to all other beings and therefore in some sense unique, it is not surprising to find that in time as the number of deities increased, it was applied to the supreme god, the old god of the Semites before they dispersed throughout the Fertile Crescent. In *Il* or 'El was all that was divine and so the name belonged to him as his own. This would explain the fact that 'El was used in all the Semitic languages and was never limited to any particular place or people (like *Ba'al*), i.e. was never considered a local deity and also would explain the preference for it in theophoric names among the various Semitic peoples.<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament it is used both appellatively (Gen. 49:25; 1 Sam. 2:3; Exod. 20:5; 34:14) and as a proper name for God (Gen. 33:20; 46:3).

As already pointed out 'Elyon appears as a deity distinct from 'El. Before the discovery of the stele mentioned above we already had an indication of 'Elyon's existence from Philo of Byblos, who claimed to pass on the testimony of Sanchunyathon, a Phoenician historian of about 600 B.C. He stated that the Phoenicians had a god 'Elioum *kaloumenos hupsistos*'—Elioum who is called most high.<sup>5</sup> Incidentally *hupsistos* is the LXX translation of 'Elyon. In the Phoenician pantheon given by Philo, *Elioum* is not only distinct but also superior and a

<sup>1</sup> M.-J. Lagrange, *Études sur les Religions sémitiques*, p. 76; J. Starcky, op. cit., p. 25; Pirot-Clamer, *Genèse*, p. 96

<sup>2</sup> E. Dhorme, *La Religion des Hébreux Nomades*, p. 335; M.-J. Lagrange, op. cit., p. 79; W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 72

<sup>3</sup> op. cit., pp. 77-9

<sup>4</sup> P. van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*, pp. 8-9

<sup>5</sup> Eusebius (*Prae. Evang.* 1:10) quotes Philo who quotes Sanchunyathon. cf. Albright, *JBL*, LX, 1941, p. 106.

progenitor of 'El.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless Philo's *Elioun* would appear to be derived from 'ly (or 'Alyy) which occurs twice at Ugarit as a title for *Ba'al* in the Keret epic.<sup>2</sup> This title, indicating that *Ba'al* is 'exalted,' is again reminiscent of 'Most High' in Gen. 14:18.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently authors are not agreed on the precise identity and age of 'Elyon; some maintain that he is an old god supplanted by 'El as head of the pantheon; others, probably more correctly, maintain that he is a later god (*Ba'al*) who assumed the ascendancy over 'El—at least in practice, since he was the god of rain and so controlled the vegetation and consequently played an important role in the eyes of the people.

In the light of this data we must try to determine what Melchisedech understood by 'El 'Elyon. A solution to the problem may well be impossible, since Genesis tells us so little and the sources outside Genesis throw no direct light on it. The varied response to the question given by modern authors is dependent to a great extent on their conception of patriarchal religion. Those who designate the patriarchs as polytheistic and syncretistic have little difficulty in seeing in 'El 'Elyon of Gen. 14 a pagan deity or deities to whom Abraham paid homage; those of them who admit the historicity of the narrative see here a confirmation of that view. On the other hand those who uphold the strict monotheism of the patriarchs see in 'El 'Elyon the One True God, worshipped by Melchisedech and recognised by Abraham. This is evidently what the author of Genesis wishes to convey and is how both Jewish and Catholic tradition have understood 'El 'Elyon.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, however, the question does not resolve itself along these lines—or rather agreement among authors is not to be sought along these lines.<sup>5</sup>

Many critics see in 'El 'Elyon not one but two deities.<sup>6</sup> 'El 'Elyon corresponds to no actual deity but is a combination of two of the principle deities in the Canaanite pantheon—'El, who by Philo is put in close connection with earth (*Ge* was his mother) and 'Elyon who had a heavenly character. The merging of these two into one gives

<sup>1</sup> cf. R. Dussaud who gives the pantheon as described by Philo in *Les Religions des Hittites et des Hourrites, des Phéniciens et des Syriens*, p. 358; he disagrees with Philo's identification of *Elioun*. For discussion cf. also Levi della Vida, in *JBL*, LXIII, 1944, pp. 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, KRT C. III, lines 5-7, p. 148; W. F. Albright, *CBQ*, VII, 1945, p. 31

<sup>3</sup> cf. Viroullaud, 'Le Roi Keret et son Fils,' *Syria*, XXXI, 1941, p. 200

<sup>4</sup> Bardy, 'Melchisedech dans la Tradition Patristique,' in *RB*, XXXIII, 1926, pp. 496f.

<sup>5</sup> Nowhere in the Old Testament is it explicitly asserted that the patriarchs were strictly monotheistic, but the whole tone of the narratives gives the impression that they were. cf. *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 105bc.

<sup>6</sup> R. Dussaud, op. cit., p. 359; Levi della Vida, op. cit.; J. Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis*, ad loc.; R. J. Tournay, *RB*, LVI, 1949, p. 49; Chaine, *La Livre de la Genèse*, ad loc.

'El 'Elyon a universalistic character not possessed by any of the actual deities in the pantheon; he is the 'creator of heaven and earth.' This universalistic character according to these critics is what is intended by the author of Gen. 14:18-20, who is considered to be either exilic or postexilic. His intention would therefore be to project the monotheistic and universalistic character of Yahweh of his time back to the patriarchal period, making Him the God of the patriarchs and at the same time insinuating that He was the God always worshipped in the Holy City.

Much of this is pure phantasy, seeking as it does to impose on ancient mythology a logical system which it never possessed. There is absolutely no reason for the assertion that 'El 'Elyon never was an actual deity but was the result of theological speculation.<sup>1</sup> Moreover the whole hypothesis is based on late conceptions of 'El and 'Elyon related by Philo which have nothing to do with the period in question. The pantheon too as described by Philo must now be considered ideal rather than real at any given period.<sup>2</sup> The Ugarit texts in no way limit 'El to the role of 'god of earth' alone; he is the Supreme God, above all things, 'creator of creatures,' living at a great distance while his dominion is universal. On the other hand 'Elyon's existence as a distinct deity is extremely doubtful in the Ugarit period, where 'Elyon appears to be a title of *Ba'al* the Storm God, who does not have the heavenly character demanded by the above hypothesis.

However the fact that their hypothesis is based on late conceptions of 'El and 'Elyon in no way disturbs these authors, since they consider the narrative to be a late composition. For them the whole of chapter 14 is tendentious, seeking to glorify the patriarch Abraham as a warlike hero. The encounter with Melchisedech, whether it be considered as part of the original narrative or an interpolation into it, is also considered tendentious, the work of the Jerusalem priests wishing to vindicate their right to tithes by appealing to a supposed incident in the life of Abraham.

Therefore before any solution to the question of how Melchisedech imagined 'El 'Elyon is possible—in fact before the question can be posed—the antiquity and historicity of the narrative must be established. It is now universally acknowledged that chapter 14 does not belong to any of the three main sources of Genesis, but in itself this is no indication of high antiquity. De Vaux has aptly refuted the hypercritical and arbitrary speculations of those who deny the historicity of chapter 14 and has shown its historical character and likelihood.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> cf. W. F. Albright, *CBQ*, vii, 1945, p. 31

<sup>2</sup> P. Nautin, 'Valeur Documentaire de l'Histoire Phénicienne,' *RB*, lvi, 1949, p. 577

<sup>3</sup> 'Les Découvertes Modernes et les Patriarches Hébreux,' *RB*, lv, 1948, p. 327

However, he explicitly excludes the Melchisedech pericope from his discussion, as demanding special treatment.

It is argued that the Melchisedech scene (vv. 18-20) is an interpolation since it interrupts the narrative of vv. 1-17 and 21-4.<sup>1</sup> However, it must be considered part of the original composition of the author since 'El 'Elyon in the mouth of Abraham in v. 22 is unintelligible if isolated from what has preceded in vv. 18-20. In favour of the antiquity of the content, no more cogent argument can be had than the fact that Judaism of the exilic or post-exilic period would not have invented and inserted an account where a Canaanite non-Israelite figured as a priest of God and to whom Abraham, the father of the race, paid his respects. The content therefore argues to the antiquity of the narrative and indeed to the antiquity of the whole chapter of which it is an integral part.<sup>2</sup>

Assuming therefore the antiquity and historicity of the narrative we may now proceed to the 'El 'Elyon of Melchisedech. Taken as it stands, 'El 'Elyon might conceivably mean the 'god 'Elyon' or the 'god that is 'Elyon.'<sup>3</sup> 'Elyon would then be the god of Melchisedech. However, this is unlikely on account of the doubtful existence of such a god at this period and because Abraham would not have revered and honoured any other deity but 'El, the One True God, at least not after his vocation by 'El.

An opinion which merits more serious consideration is that which sees in 'El 'Elyon a designation of the god *Salem*, who would undoubtedly be the original tutelary deity of the city, the deity whence the city derived its name. The earliest name for Jerusalem is *Urusalim*, occurring in the Amarna letters. The first element *uru* (Hebrew *yeru*) is from the root *wrw* or *yrv* (Hebrew *yarah*) meaning to 'establish' or to 'found.'<sup>4</sup> Hence Jerusalem would be 'the foundation of Salem.' The existence of this deity is attested in the Ugarit texts where he is one of the numerous progeny of 'El.<sup>5</sup> Naturally then we should expect *Salem* to be venerated in the city of his foundation and its priest-king to be a priest of *Salem*.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult however to see how the titles 'Most High God' and 'Creator of heaven and earth' could be attributed to *Salem*, a minor

<sup>1</sup> In v. 17 the king of Sodom comes out to meet Abraham, but it is not until v. 21 that we learn of his object in doing so. Melchisedech is not mentioned either before or after vv. 18-20.

<sup>2</sup> The author may have used different traditions in compiling his narrative.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Chaîne, ad loc. ; Dussaud, op. cit., p. 359

<sup>4</sup> E. Dhorme, *La Religion des Hébreux Nomades*, p. 120 ; J. Lewy, *RHR*, cx, 1934, pp. 50ff. ; L. H. Vincent, *RB*, LVIII, 1951, p. 364 ; W. F. Albright, *JPOS*, 1935, p. 218, n. 78, considers *uru* as an optative 'let Salem found.'

<sup>5</sup> Virouilleaud, *Syria*, xiv, 1933, pp. 128ff.

<sup>6</sup> This is the opinion defended by Lewy (loc. cit.) and by Vincent (loc. cit.).

deity in the pantheon. The text does not say that Melchisedech was a priest of Salem, nor does it imply it in any way. Still more difficult to understand is how Abraham, if Melchisedech was a priest of this deity, could honour and venerate *Salem* by assimilating him to his own God. Such syncretism and assimilation would be unparalleled and against the whole tenor of Genesis. On the other hand *Salem* may have been venerated in Jerusalem even at this time along with 'El 'Elyon, just as at Ugarit *Ba'al* was worshipped and enthroned with 'El.

The multiplicity of titles given to 'El at Ugarit and in other documents which have come to light, invites us to see in 'Elyon another such title rather than another deity. Although this title 'Most High' has not been revealed as a title of 'El in any of the sources, it must be admitted that it would be a very apt one for the supreme God. The other title 'Creator of heaven and earth' would confirm this interpretation, since 'El was the 'creator of creatures' and 'our creator 'El' at Ugarit. 'El as we have seen was the name used by the patriarchs for God, and when Melchisedech blessed Abraham in the name of 'El 'Elyon his thoughts were obviously centred on the God ('El) of Abraham, who alone could be considered as having accorded Abraham victory. 'El 'Elyon therefore in vv. 18-20 was 'El, the God of Abraham, and Melchisedech was his priest. Abraham then could honour Melchisedech without in any way compromising his own faith in God.

In Genesis 'El is given other titles too, e.g. 'El Shadday in 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25 (*Deus Omnipotens, Sublimis, Excelsus*); 'El 'ôlam in 21:23 (*Deus Aeternus*); 'El Ro'î in 16:13 (*Deus Visionis*). Whatever the derivation of the title *Shadday*<sup>1</sup> it may well be synonymous with 'Elyon, both indicating that 'El lived 'up above' in the heights. 'Most High' would not then be a superlative of comparison (highest of many) but an absolute title suggestive of God's sublimity and transcendence.

It would be an unwarranted deduction from this to conclude that Abraham identified his God 'El with the Canaanite 'El, as known from the extra-biblical sources.<sup>2</sup> Although frequently asserted such a conclusion would be against the whole tone, historical and theological, of the patriarchal history contained in Genesis, the purpose of which is to show the uniqueness, superiority and transcendence of God and his dealings with the Chosen People.

On the other hand we cannot attribute to Melchisedech the conception of God that Abraham had through revelation, even though in this encounter it is Melchisedech who takes the initiative in identifying his God with that of Abraham. Genesis tells us nothing more than

<sup>1</sup> cf. W. F. Albright, *JBL*, LIV, 1935, pp. 180ff.; De Vaux, *La Genèse*, p. 86

<sup>2</sup> De Vaux, *La Genèse*, pp. 33-4; W. F. Albright, art. cit., p. 191

that—it is concerned with Abraham and not with Melchisedech, except in his relation to Abraham. Objectively, however, we have a profession of faith in the true God by Melchisedech. How Melchisedech came to the knowledge of God we can only conjecture. From an historical point of view it is impossible to maintain that Melchisedech was a monotheist in the strict sense. The fact that he worshipped God under the title of 'Most High' is no indication that he considered Him the only God. The Egyptians and Babylonians had a 'highest god' also, but were not monotheists. The title might easily indicate the contrary to be true. Considering the environment Melchisedech quite probably believed in the existence of the other deities worshipped around him. However he was a priest of 'El, whom he identified with the God of Abraham, and being a priest he would be monolatrous. From the fact that Abraham accepted the identification and paid his respects to Melchisedech, we may justifiably conclude that Melchisedech had a higher appreciation of God than his contemporaries.

From his name he appears to have been a Semite. This is not surprising, since we know that Palestine during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries was invaded by a Semitic people, the Amorites, a nomadic barbaric people from the Arabian desert.<sup>1</sup> Before this Palestine had been under Egyptian domination, but during the XIIIth Dynasty (1991-1792) that dominion was restricted to the coastal zone and was only virtual in the interior hilly country, due to these Semitic invaders, as we know from the Egyptian Execration Texts of this period. These invaders set up small city-states, among which was probably Jerusalem. In Gen. 10:16 they are enumerated among the people of Canaan. In 14:7 they are among those defeated by the Oriental kings in southern Palestine. Abraham when he pursued the kings took Amorites as his allies (cf. 14:14, 24). In all probability then Melchisedech was an Amorite.

There are several indications that Abraham himself belonged to this ethnic group. The time of his entry into Canaan coincides with their invasion. The names of several of Abraham's ancestors were also names of towns in the region of Haran, a centre of the Amorite kingdom and the homeland of Abraham. The names of Abraham and Jacob are also Amorite names. The later Hebrews remembered their connection with this people (cf. Gen. 24:25; 31:18-24; Deut. 26:5; Ez. 16:3).

If then Melchisedech was an Amorite, of the same Semitic stock as Abraham, there would be nothing surprising in the fact that he worshipped 'El, the ancient God of the Semites, whom he identified with

<sup>1</sup> cf. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, pp. 41ff.; L. H. Vincent, *RB*, LVIII, 1951, p. 361; *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 57d and 59g

the God of Abraham. We know that the Amorites did worship 'El.<sup>1</sup> There would be no question of syncretism and assimilation on the part of Abraham such as modern scholars often suggest. Significant in this respect is the fact that when God called Abraham (Gen. 12) He did not explain who He was, nor did Abraham inquire, as did Moses at a later date. The whole narrative proceeds as though Abraham already knew and recognised God. 'El was the God of Abraham's ancestors, even though they had worshipped other gods besides 'El (cf. Jos. 24:2, 14). Melchisedech's position may therefore have been analogous to that of Abraham before the latter's vocation.

Unless some direct evidence is brought to light on this figure of the Old Testament, he must remain shrouded in mystery, even though he must, at the same time, rank as one of the greatest figures in the Old Testament because of the role he was elected to play as type of the Supreme High Priest and King: 'consider how great this man is, to whom also the patriarch Abraham gave tithes.'

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### THE KEYS OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

O God, with your judgment endow the king,  
and with your justice, the king's son.  
He shall govern your people with justice,  
and your afflicted ones with judgment. (Ps. 71:1-2)

The narrative of Christ's choosing Peter as the Rock of his Church (Matt. 16:13-20) belongs to the larger section (13:53-18:35) which outlines the form of the Church as the beginning of the everlasting kingdom of the heavens. In fact the account fits into the narrative part of this section (13:53-17:27), of which Jesus' transfiguration as the Christ and giver of the new law is the climax. Christ entrusts his messianic authority over the people of God to Simon whom he has called 'Peter.' The familiar narrative, which Matthew places in the district of Caesarea Philippi, tells us both that Jesus received Peter's profession that he is the Christ the Son of God and that he made the apostle, already promised the title 'Peter' (John 1:42), the rock in the foundation of his Church. And Peter is not only made the Rock, but he also receives 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' Peter, singled

<sup>1</sup> J. Starcky, *Cahiers Sioniens*, June 1951, p. 28