

YHWH, the Jealous El of Isra-El

With the discovery of the religious texts of Ugarit at Ras Shamra in 1929 came a window through which biblical scholarship gained a fuller view of ancient Near Eastern religion. Although Ugarit is geographically outside of “Canaan” where Israel sojourned and eventually settled, they do provide insights into the Northwest Semitic religious world that influenced Israel during the development of their own religion. The Ugaritic high god ’El is in some ways comparable with Isra-El’s patriarchal God whom they worshipped with various אֱל epithets. Both are aged with wisdom, are described as kind and compassionate, and make promises of blessing to their people. It is for these reasons that this study opens with an examination of ’El as he appears in many of the religious texts from Ugarit. It is Israel’s early history as an אֱל religion and eventual development into Yahwistic religion at Mt. Sinai that requires a thematic and theological convergence of these two chapters in Israel’s story.

The patriarchal texts that have been chosen to highlight Israel’s early אֱל religion focus on Jacob. The first topic discussed is the change of Jacob’s name to the name that would identify YHWH’s people: Isra-El (Gen. 32:28-29; 35:10). Jacob also erects an altar in Shechem and dedicates it to ’El the God of Israel (אֱל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) in Gen. 33:20, and builds another altar to ’El (of) Bethel (אֱל בֵּית-אֱל) in Gen. 35:7. These texts seem to support the proposal that early Israelite religion was one that endorsed worshipping their God as אֱל.

Exodus 3:14-15 introduces the divine name YHWH as being the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Exodus 6:2-3 explicitly states that the patriarchs worshipped their God as אֱל שְׂדֵי (one of the many אֱל epithets), because they did not know the name YHWH. It is the אֱל epithet that is introduced within the Decalogue in Exodus 20:5 (and later in Ex. 34:14) that similarly connects the אֱל religion of Israel’s past with the Yahwistic religion that began with the introduction of the divine name YHWH. Moreover, it concurrently excludes other deities from being worshiped. What makes אֱל קְנָא/קְנֹא uniquely effective is the way in which it acts to assimilate the אֱל religion of Israel’s origins while simultaneously dissimilating YHWH from being associated with any other god. This is accomplished with the theological statement that this epithet makes: YHWH is jealous and will not tolerate his people worshipping any other god.

The epithet אֱל קְנָא appears in the major covenant ceremonies in Ex. 20:5 (paralleled in Dt. 5) and Ex. 34. Joshua 24:1-28 presents another covenant made in Shechem between two groups of Israelites. One appears to be made up of remnants of the clan of Jacob who remained in Canaan. The idea of a people-group named “Israel” existing in Canaan prior to the so-called conquest in the Book of Joshua is supported with the appearance of the name “Israel” in the Merneptah Stele, where the Pharaoh claims to have “destroyed” the seed of this people group in Canaan around 1208 BCE. The Yahwistic group later entered Canaan from Egypt and their “footprints” may be recognized in the explosion of settlements in the Central Highlands at the beginning of Iron I (after 1200 BCE). They subsequently associated with the Canaanite-Israelites and coalesced into one group who agreed to serve YHWH alone. This Covenant contract is stipulated on the epithet אֱל קְנָא that expresses YHWH’s desire to be the only God of his people Israel, because he is a jealous God who punishes those who serve any other god (Ex. 20:5c; Dt. 4:24; 6:14-15; Josh. 24:20). The position taken here is that the epithet אֱל קְנָא is most effective in that it serves as a means of assimilating the familiar אֱל language that pervades the patriarchal material, while simultaneously dissimilating אֱל קְנָא from any other god, including the Canaanite ’El.