

Multilingual Gods

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The multilingual environment of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East is reflected in the principal names given to God in Hebrew literature. Application of our improved knowledge of the languages prevalent in the area during the three millennia BC shows that these names, far from being obscure or confused, have definite and logical meanings.¹

In his exposition of the semantic field attaching to the word *father* as applied to God in Christian literature, Philip Rolnick mentions some of the names used to describe God in Hebrew literature. Insight into the meaning of these names has hitherto been constrained by our limited knowledge of the languages current in the ancient Levant. But continuing lexical studies of these languages and the recognition of the multilingual nature of ancient Levantine life invite renewed analysis, applying the methodology of wide philological comparison.²

The names in question are: *AL*; *ALVE*; *IE*; and *IEVE*. At a later date these names were written with the addition of sub, supra and interlinear marks (Massoretic pointing) designed to clarify and standardize pronunciation. (This development is found in other languages, including Greek and French). In the later spellings the names are (with lower case letters denoting the added pronunciation marks): *AeL*; *ALVoaE*; *IaE*; and *IEVoaE*.

AL (*AeL*), the first name on the list, occurs in all the main Semitic languages: Assyro-Babylonian, Phoenician, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic. It may carry the generic sense 'a god' or refer specifically to God. It has, however, a concrete (if not practically

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tangible) origin, for in Sumerian it is the word used to describe the bright, shining phenomena which appear in the sky: sun, moon, planet, star — to use modern English terminology. The Greek *Helios* 'sun' is a variant of this element.³

These language links are illustrative of the ancient identification of sky phenomena with supra-terrestrial forces. The connection is reflected in the way the seven main Mediterranean and Near Eastern deities are associated with astronomical features.⁴ And this very old link between God and sky is illuminated a little more by the Sumerian use of a star-shaped grapheme as an identifier prefixing the names of deities.

The second name, *ALVE* (*ALVoaE*), is a compound of the elements *AL* (*AeL*) and *VE* (*VoaE*). What does the additional element add to the meaning of *AL* (*AeL*)? In the Hebrew alphabet the letter transcribed *V* (vav/waw) is capable of representing several sounds: V, W, Ō or U. It is the graphic equivalent of the archaic Greek digamma (vau) whose equivocal status led to its replacement in later Attic Greek by Upsilon (U) and Omega (Ō).

Since the element *AL* (*AeL*) occurs in Sumerian, it is logical to look to Sumerian for the additional element *VE* (*VoaE*). The element *VH/OH/UH* offers an adequately close sound resemblance. It is represented by an ideograph which carries the sense of (male) power and strength; a sense which well qualifies *AL* (*AeL*) 'God.' So the name *ALVE* (*ALVoaE*) yields the meaning 'God of Power/Strength,' although the rendering 'Great God' trips off the English tongue more readily.

When other languages which came within the orbit of the ancient Hebrews are examined, Egyptian offers confirmation that the element *VE* (*VoaE*) equates with power and strength. Consider the well-known Egyptian word *pharaoh*. The second element is similar and carries the same meaning. In the literal sense *pharaoh* describes a 'great house,' the complex of administrative, residential and cult buildings used by the ruler; later coming to mean the ruler himself. The word appears in Hebrew as *PR'E* (*PaR'oE*). And the Arabic cognate is used to describe a powerful or eminent person or leader.⁵

The third name, *IE* (*IaE*), is an echo of the Sumerian *EA*, one of the descriptions of the deity *ENKI* 'Lord of Earth.' This deity is the

creator of people, and later saves one from a destructive flood by advising him to build a special boat.⁶ The ideograph which represents *EA* has a wide semantic field which includes 'father' and 'cosmocrator,' both appropriate titles for God.

The fourth name, *IEVE* (*IEVoaE*), is a compound of *IE* (*IaE*) and *VE* (*VoaE*), the additional element being the same as that which appears as a suffix to *AL* (*AeL*). This gives the name *IEVE* (*IEVoaE*) the literal sense 'Father/Cosmocrator of Power/Strength,' or in idiomatic English 'Great Father/Cosmocrator.'

This analysis of the name *IEVE* resolves the grammatic puzzle posed by the name phrase *IEVE ALEIM* (*IEVoaE ALoEIM*). This is traditionally rendered into English as 'Lord God,' but *ALEIM* is a plural form of *ALVE*, meaning 'gods,' and the phrase *IEVE ALEIM* appears often in ancient Hebrew literature as the subject of a singular verb in instances where God — and only God — is the intended subject. If *IEVE* means 'Great Father/Cosmocrator,' the puzzle is immediately solved, for the phrase *IEVE ALEIM* can only mean 'Great Father/Cosmocrator of Gods;' that is to say 'The Supreme God.' And although this carries a tinge of pantheism, the picture of *IEVE* as supreme among the many deities of the multicultural world in which the Hebrews lived is entirely realistic. Ancient Hebrew literature freely refers to the deities of other cultural groups, and depicts *IEVE* as the most powerful deity among them.⁷

It is true that the analysis of the name *IEVE* as 'Great Father/Cosmocrator' differs from the explanation given in Exodus (3:12-15), which links *IEVE* with the verb *EIE* 'to be.' But while the notion of God being what he chooses to be offers existential satisfaction in the context of the burning bush incident, it does not exclude another meaning. Word play was a popular device of the story teller in the ancient world.

The Hebrew names for God analyzed here share the kind of naming protocol found throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Customarily (for names of people and places as well as deities), they define identity. The names state that God is a powerful force of astral provenance, as well as a father and cosmocrator.

It was normal, too, for deities to have more than one reverential name. So, for example, in Phoenician literature a deity described as

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AeL is also *AB ADM* 'Father of Man.'⁸ And in Greek literature Apollo is addressed as *ANAX APOLLŌN* 'Lord Father God,' *PHOIBOS APOLLŌN* 'Bright/Shining Father God,' *ANAX PHOIBOS* 'Bright/Shining Lord,' and more extravagantly as *ANAX PHOIBOS APOLLŌN* 'Lord Bright/Shining Father God.'⁹

Even within the small selection of Mediterranean and Near Eastern deity names considered here, the pervasive persistence of the same word elements is outstanding. The time factor (at least three millennia) is large, as is the area factor (several thousand miles of land and sea), but cross cultural transmission in the naming of gods has leapt over these boundaries in a way which provides the comparative philologist with a rich field for exploration.

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NOTES

1. For a summary of previous theories see the Hebrew lexicon of Koehler and Baumgartner.

2. For a recent consideration of this matter see Hutchins, *Cleopatra's Languages*.

3. The name of the Greek sun deity *APOLLŌN* (Apollo) derives from *AL* combined with the Semitic word element *AB* 'father.'

4. The seven are the sun and moon, and the planets Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn; from which also derive the names of the days of the week.

5. The Sumerian cognate *BAR* describes what is separate, apart, distinguished. The semantic field of the Hebrew and Arabic verb *PaRa'a* also covers this sense.

6. Comparable with the Hebrew creation and flood narratives of Genesis. For an English translation and analysis of the Sumerian narratives featuring *ENKI/EA*, see Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* and *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*.

7. In particular see the Hebrew histories in Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

8. A comprehensive assemblage of Phoenician literature is found in Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual*.

9. See, for example, Hesiod's poem "To Pythian Apollo."

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