

Elyon, Bull El, and Yahweh: Another Look at Deuteronomy 32:8-9

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Most scholars agree that the masoretic text of Deuteronomy 32:8 reflects a theological revision of a more original text reflected in 4QDeut¹ and the Septuagint. *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* 5 and the *Oxford Hebrew Bible* sample edition concur on this point, but differ on details. Neither considers the possibility that the revision encompassed the first word of 32:9. In this note, I adopt a text-critical proposal advanced by Jan Joosten that restores a reference to “Bull El” in Deut 32:8. The million-dollar question then is: how do Elyon, Bull El, and Yahweh relate to one another in the theology of the original – or more original poem – per Joosten’s reconstruction? The hypothesis Joosten develops sees Yahweh as a rogue desert God, not one of Bull El’s sons at all, and not identifiable with Elyon either.

First of all, a look at the textual data. The impatient reader is invited to go to the end of the post for text and translation of MT and pre-MT Deuteronomy 32:8-9.

The apparatus to Deut 32:8-9 in the OHB sampler reads:

32:8 אֱלֹהִים] 4QDt¹ (אלוהים) G (θεοῦ) יִשְׂרָאֵל M SP (theol) § || 9 כִּי M SP] *וְכִי G (καὶ ἐγενήθη) (+ conj) || fin] + יִשְׂרָאֵל SP G (Ἰσραήλ) (explic)

The apparatus to Deut 32:8-9 in BHQ 5 reads:

32:8 : יִשְׂרָאֵל : בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל Smr α' θ' σ' V S (T^J) T^{ONF} (em scr) | בני אלוהים 4QDeut¹ G | ἀγγέλων θεοῦ G^{Mss} (exeg) || pref אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי 4QDeut¹ G ❖ • 9 כִּי Smr V S T | καὶ ἐγενήθη G ❖ • : נַחֲלָתוֹ 4QDeut¹ V S T | נַחֲלָתוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל Smr G ❖

BHQ correctly cites 4QDeut¹ V S T in support of MT at the end of 32:8.

OHB and BHQ come to slightly different conclusions with respect to 32:8. Crawford’s reconstruction traces the evolution of the passage step-by-step:

First, the G reading, υἱῶν θεοῦ, may be retroverted as either **בני אל** or **בני אלוהים** (=4QDeut¹). If the former is chosen, then it is easy to suppose that the Vorlage of M SP, wishing to change a polytheistic text to monotheistic orthodoxy, inserted the consonants **ישר** before **אל**, thus creating the reading **בני ישראל**. Finally, 4QDeut¹’s **אלוהים** is simply a scribal change, employing the more common term for “God.”

It is doubtful, however, that **בני אלוהים** (בני) is an example of assimilation to the usual. The phrase only occurs once elsewhere (Job 38:7). More common: **בני האלהים** (Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1) and **בני אלים** (Ps 29:1; 89:7).

Jan Joosten has recently offered an alternative, and in my view persuasive, reconstruction.¹ I suggest the following, not as a criticism of either BHQ or OHB, except

¹ Jan Joosten, “A note on the text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8,” *VT* 57 (2007) 548-555. Other recent treatments of note include: Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and The Sons of God,” *BibSac* 158 (2001) 51-74; Innocent Himbaza, “Dt 32,8, une correction tardive des scribes. Essai d’interprétation et de datation,” *Bibl*

insofar as they fail to cite all the relevant textual data, but as a way of reopening the question:

בני ישראל כי (והים) ויהי to והים) (crpp of בני אלוהים) ([lacuna] 4QDt¹ (theol) α' θ' σ' V S (T^J) T^{ONF} (theol) G^{848 106c} (αγγελων θεου και εγενηθη) G^{848 106c} (υιων θεου και εγενηθη) (theol) 4QDt¹ ([lacuna] בני אלוהים) (crpp of והי to והים) (והים) בני ישראל כי M SP V S T is then seen to be the second element in a revision whose other element in ישראל, likewise attested in M SP V S T. The theological revision is obtained with the smallest of changes. A translation of כי with “behold,” on the other hand, is a weak expedient. It is doubtful that כי ever had such a meaning; to invoke it here is an example of exegetical desperation.

On Joosten’s reconstruction, an original שר אֵל ‘Bull El’ was shortened in one stream of transmission, in keeping with later theological sensibilities, to mere אֵל. It is my proposal that καὶ ἐγενήθη G reflects ויהי by analogy with standard translation practice elsewhere, with the 4QDeut¹ reading then seen to be the result of mechanical error. The כי attested in M SP V S T is then seen to be the second element in a revision whose other element in ישראל, likewise attested in M SP V S T. The theological revision is obtained with the smallest of changes. A translation of כי with “behold,” on the other hand, is a weak expedient. It is doubtful that כי ever had such a meaning; to invoke it here is an example of exegetical desperation.

The revised text reads thus:

בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם	בְּהַנְחִיל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם
לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	יַצֵּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים
יַעֲקֹב חֶבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ	כִּי חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ

When the Most High gave nations their inheritance,
 when he divided humankind,
 he set the bounds of the peoples
 according to the number of the children of Israel,
 for the Lord’s portion is his people.
 Jacob, the lot of his inheritance.

The unrevised text would have read thus:

בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם	בְּהַנְחִיל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם
לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי שֵׁר-אֵל	יַצֵּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים
יַעֲקֹב חֶבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ	וְיִהְיֶה חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ

When Elyon gave the nations an inheritance,
 when he divided humankind,
 he set the bounds of the peoples
 according to the number of Bull El’s children,
 and Yahweh’s portion was his people,
 Jacob, the lot of his inheritance.

Bibliography

Sidnie White **Crawford**, ed., *Oxford Hebrew Bible Sample Edition* [= Deut 32:1-9] (link [here](#)); Jan **Joosten**, “A note on the text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8,” *VT* 57 (2007) 548-555; Carmel **McCarthy**, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Quinta 5. Deuteronomy* (gen. ed. Adrian Schenker et al.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007). 82 (2002) 527-548; W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness. Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 223-224.