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

John Hobbins
ancientthebrewpoetry.typepad.com

Most scholars agree that the masoretic text of Deuteronomy 32:8 reflects a theological revision of a more original text reflected in 4QDeut\(^1\) 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
32:8 & \text{ אל} \quad 4Q\text{Deut}^1 \quad (\text{o almonds}) \quad G \quad (\text{theol}) \quad § \quad 9 \quad \text{M SP} \quad ] \quad \text{viri} \quad G \quad (\text{καὶ ἐγένεθος}) \quad (+ \text{conj}) \quad || \text{fin} \quad ] \quad + \quad \text{ishrāl} \quad SP \quad G \quad (\text{'Ισραήλ}) \quad (\text{explic}) \\
9 & \text{כי} \quad \text{M SP} \quad ] \quad \text{καὶ} \quad \text{ἐγενήθη} \quad (+ \text{conj}) \quad || \text{fin} \quad ] \quad + \quad \text{ישר} \quad \text{SP} \quad G \quad (\text{Israel}) \quad (\text{explic}) \\
\end{align*}
\]

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

\[
\begin{align*}
32:8 & \text{>:</br> Smr a' 0' s' V S (T') \quad T\text{ONF} \quad (\text{em scr}) \mid \text{��רלואי} \quad 4Q\text{Deut}\text{g} \quad G \quad \text{γιγέλων} \quad \text{θεοο} \quad \text{G}\text{Mss} \quad (\text{exeg}) \quad || \text{pref} \quad \text{בככ אלדים} \quad 4Q\text{Deut}\text{g} \quad G \quad 9 \quad \text{Smr V S T} \mid \text{και ἐγένεθος} \quad G \quad 9 \quad \text{V S T} \mid \text{עטומט ישראל} \quad \text{Smr} \quad G \\
9 & \text{כי} \quad \text{Smr V S T} \mid \text{καὶ} \quad \text{ἐγενήθη} \quad G \quad 9 \quad V S T \mid \text{ס綜合 ישראל} \quad \text{Smr} \quad G \\
\end{align*}
\]

BHQ correctly cites 4QDeut\text{g} 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 θεοο, may be retroverted as either בְּנֵי אל (4QDeut\text{e}). 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 before אל, thus creating the reading בְּנֵי ישראל. Finally, 4QDeut\text{g}'s אלדים is simply a scribal change, employing the more common term for “God.”

It is doubtful, however, that אלדים (בְּנֵי) is an example of assimilation to the usual. The phrase only occurs once elsewhere (Job 38:7). More common: בְּנֵי האלדים (Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1) and בְּנֵי 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

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

On Joosten’s reconstruction, an original ‘Bull El’ was shortened in one stream of transmission, in keeping with later theological sensibilities, to mere אל. It is my proposal that καὶ ἐγένηθη G reflects ויהי by analogy with standard translation practice elsewhere, with the 4QDeut 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 ישראלי, 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:

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:

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