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A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim. Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2001.
(22 cm, XVI, 172). ISBN 1-58983-016-4. \$ 39.95.

This study was defended as a doctoral dissertation at the Johns Hopkins University in March 1999 and is now published slightly modified in the SBL Dissertation Series (No. 183). The dissertation was guided by P. Kyle McCarter Jr. Burnett tries to demonstrate with this "comprehensive reappraisal of biblical Elohim" that the title Elohim played a significant role in the religion of ancient Israel and can be regarded as important element in the rise of monotheism.

In the first half of his book he offers a thorough and interesting survey of the extra biblical counterparts of Elohim, from the Late Bronze to the first millennium. Especially in Akkadian texts since the seventh century BCE he finds many examples of the plural "gods" (*ilānū*) functioning as a singular. He assumes that this usage was borrowed from the Canaanite expression attested in the Amarna letters. The term Elohim in Biblical Hebrew would have been another example of this Canaanite linguistic development. In his view Elohim should be regarded as concretized abstract plural. Geographical distribution of the term in the Late Bronze Age would point to an origin in the coastal plains of Palestine, from which it spread into the highlands.

Comparing it to other words for "god" in Biblical Hebrew Burnett finds Elohim to be used especially as a reference to patron deities ("the god of PN") and in the context of international settings with references to other gods than the god of Israel, serving as a counterpart to Elohim as a plural form.

The second half of the book is devoted to the study of the use of the title Elohim in Israelite Religion. Its use as an alternative to the name of Israel's god seems to be typical of the northern Israelite religion. Burnett pays special attention to the phrase used by king Jeroboam I: "These are your gods, o Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). He traces this back to an ancient tradition according to which the divine help in the exodus was ascribed to a great number of divine beings or powers assisting the god of Israel. This would explain the plural use of Elohim. In a similar way the term Elohim in relation to the Ark of the

Covenant is interpreted as referring to some kind of divine plurality, which is also expressed in the epithet Sabaoth, "of (divine) armies". Originally the title Elohim in its plural meaning would have been related to the ark in Bethel. Apparently it was taken up by Jeroboam investing the new cult in Bethel. The fact that it is associated here with a single-deity bull symbol would indicate that the plural Elohim had already become "a frozen formula". In the books of Amos, Hosea and in the cycle of Elijah Burnett finds traces of attempts to take away the tensions between different theologies by identifying Elohim with YHWH.

In the final chapter Burnett discusses the significance of the term Elohim in the pentateuchal source E. In modern research the identification of a distinct and independent literary source named after its use Elohim is disputed. Burnett is well aware of that and, therefore, cautious in his choice of texts. The point he wants to make is that as in the other northern Israelite Elohim traditions source E testifies of exclusive loyalty to YHWH and pays extra attention to the identity of the god denoted by the title Elohim.

Burnett's study can be welcomed as an important contribution to the philological study of the word Elohim. It offers much material, especially from Akkadian sources, regarding the use of the plural "gods" as a singular. His theorizing, however, on the origin of this use of the plural form and on the history of the title Elohim in Israelite religion are not overall convincing. This would take a larger study with more attention to literary critical issues, identifying the different layers of the texts and dating them more precisely. One also misses a more specific description of the process leading to monotheism. Burnett remains rather vague in this matter, suggesting an early rise of monotheism, which left some room for polytheistic elements.

Burnett handles his material well, especially the primary and to lesser degree also the secondary sources. With regard to the latter it is surprising to note the reevaluation of a number of more or less obsolete theories. Next to renewed attention to the E source one can point in this connection to the comparison made by Julian Morgenstern in an article in 1942 of the ark with the pre-Islamic Arab *qubbâ* (p. 95). He also takes up the conclusions of an article by Wijngaards of 1965 about two distinct versions of the exodus formula (p. 115). Although the analysis of Wijngaards is still worthwhile, the discussions on this issue did not stop in 1965. Finally, one minor detail: the Christian name of Wijngaards is Johannes Nicolaas Maria. His friends called him Hans and certainly not, as suggested by Burnett: Joanne.

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