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**Burnett, Joel S.**

***A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim***

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In keeping with the stated purpose of the series, this monograph represents the slightly modified doctoral dissertation of the author. Burnett's thesis was submitted to the Johns Hopkins University in 1999.

Burnett begins his study with the surprising fact that the topic of *ʾēlohîm* has not received much scholarly attention. This study attempts to address the philological, historical, and literary issues that remain unresolved in association with this term. Burnett does this by examining ancient West Asian comparative material as well as internal biblical material in order to determine the origin and meaning of the term. He also explores the role of *ʾēlohîm* in Israelite religion from a history of religions perspective. The pentateuchal source E is considered with a critical assessment of the source criticism behind the division of the material into a separate collection. Following a brief introductory chapter, the material is divided into three main chapters.

In his first main chapter (ch. 2) Burnett explores the comparative, extrabiblical evidence for *ʾēlohîm* as a grammatical plural used as a singular noun. Burnett cites several Late Bronze Age Akkadian examples of *ilānū* from Syria-Palestine in which this plural ("gods") functions as a singular. Furthermore, he notes, the plural usages occur in the coastal and valley areas but not in the mountains and hinterlands of this region. Burnett argues for a Canaanite origin for this expression, whose meaning

(“god”) is unaffected by a singular or plural form. Noting the imprecision of phrases such as “plural of majesty” and the like, Burnett makes a case for this usage as a “concretized abstract plural” (22). Phoenician inscriptions offer Iron Age parallels in their usage of *ilm* as a singular, and although Aramaic may be used as evidence, no certain examples of this usage have yet been found in that language. If any of the potential examples do confirm this usage, they may be clearly traced to a borrowing from Canaanite. The inscription from Tell Deir ‘Allā is compared to this phenomenon before Burnett turns to the first-millennium Akkadian examples of “god” written as a plural. Royal correspondence, wisdom literature, ritual texts, an inscription of Nabonidus, hymn texts, and personal names all attest the significant usage of the plural “gods” with a singular meaning of “deity” or “god,” with no specific nuance.

Burnett then turns attention to *’ēlohîm* as a common noun in its generic and abstract character. Although *’ēlohîm* is used interchangeably with other words for “god” in the Hebrew Bible, its usages are somewhat more flexible than these other words. The term *’ēlohîm* also stands as the usual word for individual, group, territorial, or national patron deities. This is reflected in the epithets “god of the fathers” and “god of Israel.” Burnett ends the chapter by discussing singular and plural *’ēlohîm* in international and Israelite contexts in the biblical narrative.

Burnett handles this material well. He makes a coherent case for a Canaanite origin for the plural usage of *’ēlohîm*; however, he seems to hold to a fairly early monotheistic interpretation of Israel’s usage of the word at points.

The third chapter focuses on the title *’ēlohîm* in Israelite religion. Burnett notes at the outset that texts utilizing *’ēlohîm*, as opposed to the divine name, tend to be northern in origin. As representative of this northern orientation, Jeroboam’s cultic phrase “these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (80) in 1 Kgs 12:28 is discussed at some length. Comparing this formula with the Philistines’ statement in 1 Sam 4:7–8, Burnett suggests that both were based on “a longer exodus litany, one in which *’ēlohîm* serves repeatedly and exclusively as the designation of the divine” (84). This exodus litany included other divine beings who

assisted in the plagues and exodus: the destroyer; the messenger of God; the pillars of cloud and fire; hail, pestilence, death, and plague; God's burning anger, fury, indignation, and distress, according to Exod 12–15 and Ps 78, respectively. This divine entourage accounts for the plural use of *ʾēlohîm* in the exodus traditions.

In association with the ark, the plural *ʾēlohîm* formula may be explained by the title “YHWH of Sabaoth” (“Yahweh of [divine] Armies” [90]) as well as by the ark's association with YHWH's hypostatized attributes, particularly God's Might and Glory (as found in Pss 78:61; 96:6). Jeroboam's use of the formula with the single-deity bull symbol is explained by the fact that the plural *ʾēlohîm* had already become a frozen expression by this period. Burnett traces the origin of the plural *ʾēlohîm* formula to Bethel, in special association with the ark. When the ark was transferred to Shiloh, the formula remained in use at Bethel. The explanation for its presence there may be found in Exod 32, since Aaron's family was associated with Bethel, as was the bull/calf image. The negative Exod 32 account may then be traced to the rival priestly faction at Shiloh, although the positive connection between Exod 32 and the Bethel bull cult may have originated in Bethel. All of this indicates that *ʾēlohîm* had acquired an authoritative status in the northern national cult.

The pentateuchal material preferring the use of *ʾēlohîm* has a distinct northern orientation, and there are no unexplained examples of the Elohist tradition in Judah. These pentateuchal uses of *ʾēlohîm* tend to utilize the title as a singular. Amos, whose ministry was directed to the north, uses *ʾēlohîm* only once (in authentic Amos material), in 8:14: “as your God lives, O Dan” (108). This single use has negative implications concerning the cult at Dan, which, in its northern context, was ambiguous. Hosea, also representing the north, frequently uses *ʾēlohîm* but takes care to clarify that Israel's *ʾēlohîm* is YHWH. The pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle also emphasizes who Israel's *ʾēlohîm* is.

Burnett offers an interesting interpretation of this material, sketching a plausible route of influence from Bethel to Shiloh and the northern kingdom in general. His assessment of the exodus *ʾēlohîm* as including YHWH's attendants does

raise the question of whether or not Israel's early adoption of the plural *ʾēlohîm* included a polytheistic dimension. Burnett explains the origin in a concretized abstract, but the question remains whether or not this abstract harbored a polytheism in early Israel.

Burnett's fourth and final chapter is a discussion of the pentateuchal source E. After a brief review of the state of E studies, Burnett delineates the contents of E and justifies their assemblage. The delineation includes an assessment of the basic characteristics of E: preference for the epithet *ʾēlohîm*, an obvious ethical sensitivity, the deity's remoteness, and a distinctly northern orientation. As Burnett considers E's role in the patriarchal traditions, he asks whether E shares the emphases of other *ʾēlohîm* material: the clarification of the identity of *ʾēlohîm* and the exclusive loyalty to this deity. The Genesis E materials treat *ʾēlohîm* as the patron deity of the ancestors. Since there is only one patron deity per patriarch and families often passed deities down the generations, for E *ʾēlohîm* is the one god of the ancestors. E portrays *ʾēlohîm* as guiding and protecting the ancestral figures, and E identifies *ʾēlohîm* by relationship to the sanctuaries of Bethel, Shechem, and Beer-sheba. Beyond Genesis, Burnett traces E through sections of Exod 3:1–15, where *ʾēlohîm* is finally equated with YHWH. This demonstrates that E was a continuous source and that its point is the same as that of the northern prophets: the identification of Israel's *ʾēlohîm*. The continuing use of *ʾēlohîm* beyond the revelation of the divine name demonstrates that *ʾēlohîm* "had a significance that was independent of the narrative" (151). This title, according to Burnett, also had significance for the exclusive Yahwism that developed out of it.

Burnett makes an intricately woven case for the internal coherence of E. In the light of recent reluctance to accept E as an actual source, Burnett is able to make a worthy case for the Elohist. Burnett has done the scholarly community a favor by raising the issue of the meaning and function of *ʾēlohîm* in the text. The only sense of unfulfilled expectation comes at the brevity of the study. Burnett states at the outset that he will be addressing neither P's use of the term nor the "Elohistic Psalter" (6 n.

12). These major aspects of the larger picture of *ʾēlōhîm* in Israel, as well as its use elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, suggest that there is a larger study to be done on the topic. When such a larger study is undertaken, Burnett's monograph will be a necessary and helpful resource.