

## Who was the God of the Exodus: El or Yahweh?

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### Abstract

Some scholars claim that 1 Kgs 12:28 and Exod 32:4 plus Num 23:22; 24:8 indicate that El rather than Yahweh was originally considered the god of the Exodus. I evaluate this claim from a variety of perspectives: (1) El and Yahweh as separate deities; (2) their distinct geographical areas of activity; (3) their direct differentiation in some biblical texts; (4) the content of 1 Kgs 12:28; Exod 32:4; Num 23:22; 24:8; and (5) the implausibility of Yahweh replacing El if the latter was the original god of the Exodus.

Yahweh is commonly understood to be the God of the Exodus. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the First Testament knows the basic elements: the divine name Yahweh was revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai, where Yahweh commissioned him to lead the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. Yahweh inflicted ten plagues on the Egyptians until Pharaoh finally released the Israelites, then Yahweh drowned the pursuing Egyptians at the Reed Sea so that the Israelites could escape completely. After this Yahweh provided food and water in the desert and handed down the Covenant regulations that would structure their religious and social lives from that point forward. Regardless of its historicity, this is the story that most people know.

However, some scholars have challenged Yahweh's role in the Exodus on the basis of the Golden Calves narratives and the Balaam oracles. In Exodus 32, when the people see the calf that Aaron made they shout, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:4). Jeroboam makes the same pronouncement with respect to the calves he made for the sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:38). Some link the calves in both narratives to El, in which case he would be the one who "brought you up from the land of Egypt," instead of Yahweh. In addition, the Balaam Oracles include the statement that the one who "brings them out of Egypt is like the horns of a wild ox for him" (Num 23:22; 24:8). The phrase is preceded by the Hebrew word *'ēl*, which can mean either the common noun "god," or the divine name "El." Once again, some link the bovine imagery ("a wild ox") in the second part of the phrase to El, and

therefore translate *'ēl* as the divine name, making El, not Yahweh, the one who “brings them out of Egypt” in Num 23:22 and 24:8 as well.

## I. El and Yahweh as Separate Deities

Before examining those texts more closely, it is first necessary to consider the relationship of El and Yahweh, specifically whether they are simply different names or titles for a single deity, which would remove any real contradiction. Exodus 3:15–16 identifies Yahweh with “the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (see also Exod 6:3) but careful examination of the Patriarch narratives in Genesis in light of extra-biblical evidence shows that the deity in those stories is El, not Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> There are three singular instances in Genesis where the Hebrew word *'ēl* is followed immediately by a specific noun or adjective, namely *'ēl ro'î* (Gen 16:13), *'ēl 'ōlām* (Gen 21:33) and *'ēl bêt-'ēl* (Gen 35:7); see also *'ēl bērit* in Judg 9:46.<sup>2</sup> While these could indicate either “god” or “El” plus an attribute, the latter formulation predominates at Ugarit,<sup>3</sup> resulting in “El who sees,” “El the eternal one,” “El of Bethel,” and “El of the covenant” respectively. Of these epithets, *'lm* is linked to El at Ugarit in KTU 1.4.IV.41; 1.10.III.5 and possibly 1.108.1, echoing his aged appearance in, e.g., KTU 1.3.V.38; 1.4.IV.41, and his title “the father of years” in KTU 1.17.VI.49; 6.VI.26 (cf. “the Ancient of Days” [NRSV: “an/the Ancient One”] in Dan 7:9, 13, 22).<sup>4</sup>

Taking these verses as single El epithets is supported by *'ēl 'elyôn* in Gen 14:18(2x), 19, and 22.<sup>5</sup> Since *'elyôn* indicates elevation, the full phrase is

- 1 See further, *inter alia*, John L. McLaughlin, *What Are They Saying About Ancient Israelite Religion?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 1–8; Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion Through the Lens of Divinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 83–109.
- 2 Gen 21:33 also refers to Yahweh, but most consider that secondary; see, e.g., Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 46, nn. 11–12.
- 3 Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 50. Excavations at the ancient city of Ugarit in northern Syria have unearthed a number of clay tablets, including mythological texts dealing with the Canaanite gods El, Ba'al, Asherah, etc. These texts are collected in *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (KTU 3), Third, Enlarged ed., ed. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, AOAT 360 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013) and are cited as KTU, which derives from the title of the 1st edition, which was in German: *Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit*.
- 4 Against Cross' reading of “El” plus “the eternal one” in Arslan Tash I.9–11 and Sinai 358 (Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 17, 19), see Dennis Pardee, “Les documents d'Arslan Tash: authentiques ou faux?” *Syria* 75 (1998): 18; P. Kyle McCarter, “An Amulet from Arslan Tash,” in *The Context of Scripture. II. Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden/New York/Cologne: E. J. Brill, 2000), 223; Blane W. Conklin, “Arslan Tash I and Other Vestiges of a Particular Syrian Incantatory Thread,” *Bib* 84 (2003): 90 and Meindert Dijkstra, “El 'Olam in the Sinai?” *ZAW* 99 (1987): 249–50 respectively.
- 5 For the following details see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 50–52; Eric E. Elnes and Patrick D. Miller, “ELYON עֵלְיוֹן,” in *DDD2*, 293–99; John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, JSOTSup 265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 20–21; Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 86–95.

traditionally rendered as “God most High.” However, the adjective is linked with El in KAI 222.A.11 (ʾl wʾlyn), and El plus ʾly are found together in some South Semitic inscriptions, which suggests that ʾēl ʾelyôn in Genesis 18 means “El, the Most High.” Moreover, ʾēl ʾelyôn is called the “creator/owner of heaven and earth” (*qōneh šamayim wāʾāreš*) in vv. 19 and 22, echoing “El, creator of the earth” (ʾl qn ʾrš) in KAI 26 A III:18 and 129:1, as well as [ʾl] qn ʾrš) in an 8th-7th century inscription from Jerusalem, plus the divine name <sup>4</sup>*El-ku-ni-ir-ša* (Elkunirša) from a Hittite myth.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Elyon is in parallel with Shadday, an El epithet, at Num 24:16; Ps 91:1.

The El epithet šadday occurs forty-eight times in the First Testament. Thirteen times it is in parallel with ʾēl and eight times is part of the phrase ʾēl šadday. Significantly, six instances of ʾēl šadday occur in Genesis (see Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; plus Exod 6:3; Ezek 10:5), which are antecedents to Yahweh’s equation with the god of the patriarchs in Exod 3:15–16 and especially Exod 6:3. While traditionally translated as “God Almighty” (cf. the Greek translation as *pantokratōr* and the Latin *omnipotens*), šadday is more likely a dual noun meaning “mountains” (cf. Akkadian šadû, “mountain”).<sup>7</sup> The name El Shadday occurs at Ugarit in KTU 1.108.12 (ʾilšdyšd, “El Shadday is hunting”),<sup>8</sup> and El is elsewhere called “the one of the mountain” (ʾil pbnḥwn; KTU 1.128.9) and dwells atop the cosmic mountain (e.g., KTU 1.4.IV.23; cf. “the mountains of El” [*harêrê-ēl*] in Ps 36:7). This and other factors point to translating ʾēl šadday as “El of the mountains.”

El also appears in Gen 49:24–26.<sup>9</sup> Verse 24c mentions ʾābîr yaʾāqōb, often rendered as “the Mighty one of Jacob.” However, changing the vowels and pointing (which were only added in the Middle Ages) in the initial term ʾabbîr produces “the Bull of Jacob,”<sup>10</sup> echoing “Bull El” (*tr ʾil*) at Ugarit (KTU 1.3.IV.54; V.35; 1.4.IV.47; etc.). This is supported by ʾēl ʾābikâ in v. 25a. The *NRSV* translates this as “the God of your father” but the phrase is paralleled with Shadday (*NRSV* “the

6 For the restoration of ʾl at the beginning of the Jerusalem ostrakon see Patrick D. Miller Jr., “El, the Creator of Earth,” *BASOR* 239 (1980): 42–46. ʾlqwnrʾ in a 1st C. CE Palmyrene inscription and ʾlqnrrʾ are similar but not identical.

7 Cf. the review of three possible etymologies in Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 102–5; he declines to decide among them.

8 For arguments against reading ʾlšdy in JSTham 255, a Thamudic B inscription from Taymaʾ, see Michael C. A. MacDonald and Geraldine M. H. King, “Thamudic,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, 2nd ed., ed. P. J. Bearman, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 437; Aren M. Wilson-Wright, “The Helpful God: A Reevaluation of the Etymology and Character of (ʾēl) Šadday,” *VT* 69 (2019): 150–51; cf. Édouard Lipiński, “Shadday, Shadrappa et le dieu Satrape,” *ZAH* 8 (1995): 248. My thanks to Aleksander Krogevoll for these bibliographical references.

9 See Matthias Köckert, “MIGHTY ONE OF JACOB יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיר,” in *DDD* 2, 573–75; Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 38, 41; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities of Canaan*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 48–52. Cf. already much earlier, Bruce Vawter, “The Canaanite Background of Genesis 49,” *CBQ* 17 (1955): 10–17.

10 In an unvocalized Hebrew text “mighty one” and “bull” would be identical: אֲבִיר.

Almighty”) in v. 25b.<sup>11</sup> This, combined with the cosmic aspects of “the blessings of your father” in v. 26, indicates that 25a refers to “El, your father.” El not only fathers the gods in the previous KTU citations, but “Bull El, your father” is also linked to King Kirtu in KTU 14.II.6, 20; IV.5; etc. In addition, “the blessings of the breasts and the wombs” in v. 25e probably alludes to Asherah, El’s wife. On their own, each point is inconclusive, but collectively the references to “bull,” “El, your Father,” “(El) Shadday,” “blessings of breasts and womb” (Asherah) and “blessings of your father,” with their clear echoes of Ugarit texts, point to El as the central deity in this text.

Finally, and most conclusively, El is twice explicitly identified as Israel’s God. In Gen 33:20 Jacob erects an altar outside Shechem and names it “El, the god of Israel” (’ēl ’ēlōhē yisrā’ēl), while in Gen 46:3 God (’ēlōhīm) says to Jacob, “I am El, the god of your father” (’ēl ’ēlōhē ’ābikā). While ’ēl in both texts could be the common noun “god,” it is immediately followed by the plural bound form of the same noun (’ēlōhē), and this latter form can only mean “god.” It is unlikely that two forms of the same noun would be used one after the other (i.e., “god, the god of Israel/of your father” instead of just “the god of Israel/your father”). In particular, since ’ēl can also indicate the divine name El; the two forms side by side would only create confusion, especially in a later monotheistic context. Therefore, the initial ’ēl in Gen 33:20 and 46:3 must indicate El, who is identified as “the god of Israel” and the “god of your father” respectively. In keeping with this, in Exod 6:3 Yahweh says that he had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday.

The preceding demonstrates that the “god of the fathers” in Genesis was El. Nevertheless, Frank Moore Cross considers Yahweh part of a title for El.<sup>12</sup> The initial *yod* in Yahweh suggests a 3rd masculine singular verbal form, and the vocalization *yahwēh* points to the causative form derived from the Hebrew root *hwh* (later *hyh*): “to be.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, *yahwēh* alludes to creative activity. Cross links this to the phrase *yhwh šēbāōt*, which he renders as “he brings into being the armies.”<sup>14</sup> Cross considers this phrase part of a longer sentence reflecting El’s creation of the divine beings: *il ʿdu yahwī šēbāōt* (“El who creates the [heavenly] armies”). For Cross, over time *yahweh šēbāōt* was separated from El, was

11 Some Hebrew manuscripts and the Samaritan Pentateuch, the LXX and the Syriac presuppose *wē’ēl* rather than MT *wē’ēl*, yielding “El Shadday” rather than just Shadday, but the point remains without the emendation.

12 For the following see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 60–75.

13 Appeals to the Arabic root *hwy*, meaning “to fall” (as in lightning), “to blow” (as in wind) or “to love/be passionate” can be rejected.

14 Cross reasonably takes the insertion of ’ēlōhīm between the two words as a later addition to solve the grammatical problem of a name in a construct chain. The shorter form occurs 261 times against the 18 instances of the longer form.

subsequently shortened to just Yahweh, and eventually replaced the name El as the primary designation for Israel's God.

A number of arguments can be mounted in support of Cross' proposal, which still finds great support among scholars today. First, El and Yahweh share many characteristics, such as wisdom, kindness, great age, a cherubim throne, rule over the divine council, Asherah as a consort, etc.<sup>15</sup> Related to this is the absence of any polemic against El in the First Testament, in contrast to the extensive and extended opposition to Ba'al. The lack of opposition to El could be because El and Yahweh were the same deity, so there was no need to oppose El.<sup>16</sup> One can also point to traditions of astral armies fighting on behalf of the Israelites and/or at the command of Yahweh in Judg 5:20; Josh 10:12 and Hab 3:11. Similarly, both Joshua (Josh 5:13–15) and Elisha (2 Kgs 6:16–17) encountered elements of the heavenly "army of the Lord."

However, in my opinion there are far stronger arguments against Cross' identification of the name Yahweh as part of a title for El. The first is that the full formula is unknown in the Bible or the extra-biblical literature, inscriptions, etc. Moreover, the shorter formula, "Yahweh Sabaoth," first appears in connection with Samuel in the late pre-monarchical period and, while not decisive, the temporal gap from the patriarchal period should at least be noted. Second, references to El creating in both the Bible and the Ugarit texts use either *qnh* or *kwn* but never *hyh*. Third, Yahweh as a creator is a later tradition, in contrast to the earliest presentations of him as a warrior god. Fourth, when El creates the divine beings, there is no indication of the warfare that is reflected in *yhwš šēbāôt*. In fact, war is not one of El's usual activities. In the Ugarit texts, battle is the purview of Ba'al, the storm god, just as Yahweh is frequently accompanied by the thunderstorm (see, e.g., Deut 33:2; Pss 29; 68:7–8; 97:2–4; 104:7; Hab 3:4); note also the theophany at Sinai. Similarly, Yahweh's victory over the sea (e.g., Exod 15:8,10; Pss 74:13–15; 89:10–11; 93:3–4; Job 26:12–13; 7:12; 38:8–11; Isa 27:1; cf. Isa 51:9–11) parallels Ba'al's defeat of his enemy Yam. Fifth, Yahweh and El have different geographical spheres of operation.

## II. Geographical Distinctions between El and Yahweh

Ancient deities were often thought to be restricted to the territory of the nation

15 Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141–42.

16 Some appeal to Jeffrey Tigay's collocation of names in Israelite inscriptions: 557 with Yahweh, 77 with El, but only a "handful" with Ba'al and none with Asherah or Anat as evidence that Yahweh and El were the same. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, HSS 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); cf. the discussion in Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 141. But Asherah is not a component of names at Ugarit, where she played a major role, and there is good evidence that she was a major part of Israelite religion as well.

for which they were the chief god, and after the settlement in Canaan, Yahweh's influence is sometimes described as restricted to Israel. For instance, Jephthah asks the King of Ammon, "Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not possess everything that Yahweh our God has conquered for our benefit?" (Judg 11:24). Similarly, David claims that if Saul exiles him from Israel then David would have to serve other gods (1 Sam 26:19), and after Elisha heals Naaman of leprosy, the latter asks to take two mule loads of Israelite soil, the earth where Yahweh is god, so that he might worship Yahweh back home in Damascus (2 Kgs 5:1–19). In the same way, El's appearances in connection with the patriarchs are restricted to the area of Canaan, and when the text uses specific El epithets most are linked to precise locales within that territory.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, Yahweh's *origins* are south of Canaan.<sup>18</sup> First of all, the name Yahweh or versions thereof are not attested in Northwest-Semitic pantheons. Second, Yahweh first reveals himself to Moses at Sinai in the south (cf. "the one of Sinai" in Judg 5:5). Some four centuries later Elijah makes a pilgrimage and encounters Yahweh there. In addition, the "War Theophanies" continued to call for Yahweh to come and fight from locations far south of Israel, despite the tradition that Yahweh dwelt in the Jerusalem temple. For instance, in Ps 68:18 Yahweh starts out from Sinai, while Deut 33:2–3 mentions Sinai, Seir (southern Edom but earlier considered Midianite territory) and Mt. Paran (in the Sinai), in parallel with each other. In Judg 5:4–5 Yahweh comes from Seir, Edom and Sinai,<sup>19</sup> and Hab 3:3 names Teman and Paran. This last text calls to mind "Yahweh of Teman" in an 8th Century BCE inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrūd, whose invocation alongside "Yahweh of Samaria" shows that Yahweh's southern associations survived long after the settlement in the north.

Building on this, some scholars have argued that Yahweh was originally a Midianite deity.<sup>20</sup> Moses first encounters Yahweh while tending the flocks of his

17 'ēl 'elyōn ("God/El Most High") is associated with Jerusalem (14:18–22), 'ēl rō'i\* ("God/El Sees") with Beer-lahay-roi (16:13) and 'ēl 'ōlām ("God/El Eternal") with Beersheba (21:33).

18 For fuller presentations of the following see Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *JSOT* 33 (2008): 131–53; McLaughlin, *What Are They Saying About Ancient Israelite Religion?* 13–20; Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 271–86.

19 Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 145 notes additional southern/Kenite connections in Judges 5. In addition to the locales in the theophany of vv. 4–5, the rain echoes flash floods in desert regions, while there are also references to "Ephraim . . . , whose roots are in Amalek" (v. 14) and Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite (v. 24). Smith builds on the work of J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus Belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 18–38.

20 A few go so far as to identify Yahweh explicitly with the Edomite deity Qos (John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, *JSOTSup* 77 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 187, 194–200; Nissim Amzallag, "Yahweh, the Canaanite God of Metallurgy?" *JSOT* 33 [2009]: 387–404; Justin Kelley, "Toward a New Synthesis of the God of Edom and Yahweh," *AntOr* 7 [2009]: 255–80) or as an Arabian (Midianite) volcano deity (Jacob E. Dunn, "A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?" *JSOT* 38 [2014]: 387–424).

father-in-law, “the priest of Midian,” and that mountain is designated “the mountain of God” before he even has the encounter (Exod 3:1), which suggests it was already a holy site.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Moshe Weinfeld notes that the verb *qrh* in Exod 3:18; 5:3 is used of revelation to foreigners, namely Balaam, in Num 23:3–4, 15–16.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, after the Exodus itself, it was Jethro, the priest of Midian and not Aaron, the high priest of Israel, who presided over the celebratory sacrificial meal at Sinai and praised Yahweh for delivering the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 18:9–12)

To this we can add points of contact between Midianite and Israelite religion, reflected in the Midianite occupation of an Egyptian copper mine at Timna, 30 km north of Eilat on the gulf of Aqaba, ca. 1150 BCE (it contained “Midianite” pottery). In an accompanying shrine, the existing images of Hathor were defaced, suggesting an opposition to images similar to that in the Ten Commandments. At the same time a tent shrine and a copper snake were installed, which recall the “tent of meeting” and the snake Moses erected in the wilderness; the latter was preserved in the Jerusalem temple as “Nehushtan” (see Exod 26; 40; Num 21:8–9; Num 21:6–9; 2 Kgs 24:8).<sup>23</sup>

This constellation of elements that are also known from Israelite religion is suggestive. It does not prove Midianite influence on the Israelites, since the reverse process or independent traditions are both plausible alternate interpretations, but some elements of the Midianite tribes, the Kenites, are said to have accompanied them to Canaan and lived among them (see Num 10:29–32; Judg 1:16; 4:11; 1 Sam 15:6–7).<sup>24</sup> If they are to be identified with the Rechabites (thus 1 Chr 2:55) then they co-existed as a conservative element among the general population, preserving ancient traditions (see 2 Kgs 10:15–27; Jer 35:1–11).<sup>25</sup> Combined with the other points above this supports the proposal that Yahweh was first encountered as a Midianite deity far from the land of Israel, which is consistent with the fact, noted earlier, that the name Yahweh is not found in any form in any North-West Semitic pantheon.

21 On the other hand, the phrase could simply convey the narrator’s assessment of its sanctity after the fact.

22 Moshe Weinfeld, “The Tribal League at Sinai,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 304.

23 However, a tent is not unexpected in the desert, and snakes were common iconography. Moreover, the date is later than the Exodus, after the Israelites would have passed through Midianite territory.

24 Weinfeld, “The Tribal League at Sinai,” 307–08 also notes Deut 33:2–3 where God is called “lover of nations” (*hōbēb ‘ammīm*). Not only does this not fit the context, but the verb only means love in Aramaic and Arabic. He revocalizes the phrase as *hōbāb ‘imām* (“Hobab was with them”), evoking Hobab the Midianite, Jethro’s son, who accompanied the Israelites along with the “myriads,” who are also mentioned in Num 10:29–36 (*rbbwt* in both).

25 The positive presentation of Midianites in Exodus is unlikely to have been invented later when Israel was at odds with them (cf. 1 Sam 15:7).



### III. Textual Differentiation between El and Yahweh

In addition to their separate initial spheres of operation, Yahweh and El are clearly distinguished in a few biblical texts. In Ps 82, God (*'ēlōhîm*) is present in the council of El. As with Gen 49:24–26 previously, the presence of two different words that can be translated as “god” indicates that *'ēl* is the divine name El, in keeping with the El title *'elyôn* in v. 6. At the same time, *'ēlōhîm* in v. 1 is accompanied by singular verbs, indicating a single deity, widely understood to be Yahweh. This distinction between El and Yahweh is explicit in the earliest preserved versions of Deut 32:8–9. The Masoretic Text (using the Leningrad Codex from ca. 1008 CE) reads, “When Elyon apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel; {9} Yahweh’s portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.” However, instead of “the sons of Israel” at the end of v. 8, the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QDeut), which predate the MT by a millennium, along with the LXX, Symmachus, and the Old Latin read “the sons of God,” i.e., the divine beings. The plain reading of this earlier variant is that Elyon, i.e., El, distributes the various nations among the divine beings, and Yahweh, one of those assembled “sons of god,” receives “Jacob” from Elyon.

But what of Exod 3:6, where Yahweh equates himself with the God of the patriarchs in his words to Moses: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?” The element of innovation this entails is evident in v. 13 when Moses asks what name he is to use when communicating with the people in Egypt, after which Yahweh directly connects the tetragrammaton with the God of the Patriarchs (v. 15). However, if those people were well acquainted with the God of the Patriarchs then there would be no need to request a name. If the God of the Fathers is in fact El, then they would know him by the various El epithets contained in those stories.<sup>26</sup> Or if that deity was known not by name but only through association with the patriarchs, then the lack of a name reflected in those traditions would not have been an issue, and in fact any name Moses could give would be meaningless to them. This means they were not familiar with that deity, but at the same time the revelation of the name itself is a new revelation. In other words, this welds together two separate traditions, arising from different groups, namely the revelation of the divine name as part of the Exodus experience and the stories of individual revelations to the three patriarchs.<sup>27</sup>

26 Otherwise we would be at a loss to explain their survival in the texts.

27 This union of the two streams is also found elsewhere in the equation of Yahweh with the “god of Jacob” (Pss 20:1; 24:6; 46:7,11; 84:8; 94:7; 114:7; 146:5; Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2), “the Mighty One of Jacob” (Ps 132:2,6; Isa 49:26; 60:16; cf. Isa 1:24) and “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Israel” (1 Kgs 18:36; 1 Chr 29:18; 2 Chr 30:6).



This sheds light on the Priestly tradition concerning the revelation of the tetragrammaton. In Exod 6:3 we find the statement, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *’ēl šadday* [God Almighty], but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.”<sup>28</sup> This is part of the over-arching biblical identification of Yahweh with El. But just as the connection between Yahweh and the god of the fathers in Exod 3 is an artificial and secondary one, so too is the connection between Yahweh and El here. This is confirmed by a glance at the priestly writers’ use of the title *’ēl šadday* elsewhere in the First Testament: apart from Exod 6:3 the two names occur together in P only at Gen 17:1,<sup>29</sup> where Yahweh calls himself El Shadday. The editorial nature of this link is evident in the fact that Yahweh is absent from the rest of the story, and the general noun *’ēlōhīm* is used instead throughout the chapter. The same pattern can be noted with respect to the other El epithets that occur in the stories of the Patriarchs.

Taken together, the preceding discussion indicates that Yahweh was initially considered separate and distinct from El. Yahweh was introduced into Canaan by groups arriving from the south, and he was initially understood as subservient to El. However, it is clear that Yahweh supplanted El as the primary deity among those who eventually constituted Israel, assimilating most of the latter’s characteristics along the way. Yahweh’s position as the head of the divine council, his cherubim throne and tent shrine, his wisdom, kindness and age, and especially his role as creator can all be paralleled in El. That this was considered a legitimate identification is evident from the lack of a polemic against El, in contrast to the polemic directed toward Ba’al in the Deuteronomistic history. This suggests that El’s assimilation into Yahweh occurred very early in the development of Israelite religion.

The fact that Yahweh and El were initially considered separate deities is important for the identity of the god of the Exodus in the Golden Calves texts and the Balaam Oracles. If those texts do identify El as the deity who liberated the Israelites from slavery that cannot be explained away as simply different names for the same god. It remains, therefore, to examine the texts in question to see if they support the scholarly claims concerning El’s agency rather than Yahweh.

#### IV. 1 Kings 12:28

In 1 Kgs 12:28, Jeroboam makes two golden calves, one each for the northern sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel, and proclaims to the people: *hinnēh ’ēlōheyka yīsrā’ēl ’āšer he’elūkā mē’ereṣ mišrāyīm* (1 Kgs 12:28). Since *’ēlōhīm* can refer

28 God appears under the first name in Gen 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3, and the two names are explicitly equated in Gen 17:1.

29 The two are also connected at, e.g., Pss 68:11,15; 91:1–2; Ruth 1:2–21; Isa 13:6 (=Joel 1:15); Ezek 1:20; 10:5; (see also the connection implied by the juxtaposition of Yahweh in the prose and *šadday* in the poetry of Job).

to either one or multiple deities, and in the case of the former can take a singular or plural verb, this can be read as either “Here is your God . . .” or “Here are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>30</sup> Two questions present themselves here, the first being whether the calves actually represent deities, and secondly, if so which one. Many commentators explain the calves not as images of a deity but, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern iconography, as a pedestal on which the deity stood.<sup>31</sup> In this view, Jeroboam would be referring to an unseen deity on top of the calves, which suggests the prohibition against representing Yahweh by an image; thus, the calves replace Yahweh’s cherubim throne over the Ark of the Covenant in the Jerusalem temple. Others insist that the calves do represent a deity, but the association of calves and bulls with a variety of ancient Near Eastern deities as a symbol of strength and power means there are a number of possible candidates. Early proposals included the Babylonian moon god Sin, linked to Aaron’s calf at Sinai, the Egyptian Apis bull and the Canaanite god Ba‘al.<sup>32</sup> But these suggestions are rejected by most contemporary commentators due to the lack of opposition to the calves by early Yahwists, even within the Deuteronomistic History, which regularly denounces Jeroboam’s sin. For instance, in the very next chapter (1 Kgs 13) the unnamed “man of God” from Judah denounces the altar at Bethel but not the calf. Similarly, Jeroboam’s calves are not mentioned in the Elijah and Elisha narratives, Jehu does not remove them during his purge of Ba‘al worship and the prophet Amos does not oppose them. In light of Elijah’s slaughter of 450 prophets of Ba‘al (1 Kgs 18) and Jehu torching the Ba‘al temple in Samaria with Ba‘al’s worshipers inside (2 Kgs 10), this is telling, especially since in the case of Jehu, immediately after the editorial note that Jehu did not eliminate Jeroboam’s calves, Yahweh pronounces that Jehu has “done well in carrying out what I consider right” (v. 30). A principled opposition to the northern calves first appears with Hosea, most likely because by his time they had become erroneously linked to Ba‘al. So, since Jeroboam’s calves were considered acceptable by such staunch Yahwists as Elijah and Jehu, the calves must have initially been considered a legitimate element of Yahweh worship, and therefore neither Sin nor the Apis Bull nor Ba‘al were linked to them.

This leads some scholars to turn to El as the deity associated with Jeroboam’s calves, and indirectly through his proclamation, with the Exodus itself. El’s links to bull imagery in the Ugarit texts were reviewed above and need not be repeated here. However, as part of Yahweh’s assimilation of El, the former took over most

30 See GKC §145i for the grammar involved, although it rejects the former reading here.

31 E.g., Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 172; Marvin A. Sweeney, *1 and 2 Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 177. Cf. the broader discussion and references in Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 318–20.

32 See the review of scholarship and references in Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 35–36.

of the latter's characteristics and associations, including links to bulls and bull-calves.<sup>33</sup> If this merger of the two deities occurred quite early, as most scholars think, then it would have been completed by Jeroboam's time and the calves would have been associated with Yahweh rather than El independently. A connection between Yahweh and a calf as a symbol of divine vigour is found in the name *Egelyo* ('glyw; "Yah[weh] is a calf") found on an 8th century Samarian ostrakon.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Yahweh is called the "Bull of Israel" in Isa 1:24 and the "Bull of Jacob" in Isa 49:26; 60:16; Ps 132:2, 5. Thus, Yahweh is an equally plausible referent for Jeroboam's calves.

In order to determine whether Jeroboam is proclaiming Yahweh or El as the god of the Exodus, let us consider which would be the more plausible candidate within the king's historical context. Most scholars, including those who think Jeroboam is referring to El in 1 Kgs 12:28, agree that the first northern king would have been unlikely to introduce new ideas at the beginning of a revolt, especially in the realm of religion where people are especially sensitive. Rather, there is widespread agreement that Jeroboam merely sought to provide an alternative to the Jerusalem-based cult by appealing to ancient traditions at Dan and Bethel.<sup>35</sup> Those who argue for El in this context see Jeroboam appealing to the El-cult reflected in the patriarchal narratives through the image of a calf. But that fails to account for the innovative aspect of attributing the Exodus to El. As outlined previously, those El narratives in Genesis all take place within the land of Canaan, and El does not act outside that territory, nor did the people who initially preserved those traditions participate in the Exodus. Instead, escaped slaves from Egypt brought their stories of liberation by Yahweh to Canaan and united with the El devotees who had always lived there, as suggested by the artificial connection of El and Yahweh in Exod 3 and 6. The Exodus traditions, firmly linked to Yahweh, became the dominant paradigm for the nation's origins and was shared by all, regardless whether their ancestors had directly participated in it or not. As such, for Jeroboam to attribute the Exodus to El rather than Yahweh would be exactly the kind of religious innovation rejected by the majority of modern interpreters in this context.

## V. Exodus 32

Nevertheless, proponents of El as the god of the Exodus point to Exod 32 for support. There, in response to the people's challenge, Aaron constructs a golden calf, to which the people respond, 'ēlleh 'ēlōheyka yīśrā'ēl 'āšer he'elūkā mē'ereš mišrāyîm ("These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land

33 For calf/bull iconography for Yahweh see Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 317–22.

34 Klaus Koenen, "Der Name 'glyw auf Samaria-Ostrakon nr 41," *VT* 44 (1994): 396–400.

35 Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 36.

of Egypt”). The parallels with Jeroboam’s actions and proclamation are obvious. However, the plural demonstrative “these” (’ēlleh) makes no sense in reference to a single golden calf, indicating that this passage is based on the Jeroboam narrative with its two calves. Thus, the arguments against seeing El in the earlier text apply even more to a later text that is even further removed from the date of the supposed events.<sup>36</sup> Wyatt departs from the consensus concerning Exod 32’s dependence on 1 Kgs 12 by removing the vowel letters from the former to produce what he considers an earlier form of the text: ’l ’lhk yśr’l ’śr h’lk m’rş mşrym. While he acknowledges that this could legitimately be translated as most do based on the MT, he reads it as “El is your God, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt,” making the connection with El explicit.<sup>37</sup> However, this fails to take into account v. 5, where Aaron announces that the next day will be a “festival to Yahweh.” Furthermore, Janzen has correctly linked Aaron’s calf with the “divine warrior” of the Exodus, the one who “brought them out of Egypt” by defeating the Egyptians.<sup>38</sup> As noted above, it is Ba’al, not El, who functions as a warrior god at Ugarit. But the former has already been ruled out in connection with Jeroboam’s calves, and must be here as well. Thus, even if we accept Wyatt’s hypothetical reconstructed text that can be read in more than one way, since the larger literary unit refers to Yahweh<sup>39</sup> it makes better sense to read it in keeping with MT, i.e., “these are your gods” and to take this as referring to Yahweh.

## VI. Numbers 23:22 and 24:8

Some scholars also appeal to the Balaam oracles as support for an early tradition that El was the God of Exodus.<sup>40</sup> Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 read ’ēl mōšî’ām mīmā mišrāyīm kētô ’āpôt rē’ēm lô, which can be translated as either “God . . .” or “El, who brings them out from Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for him.” Those who prefer the latter option point to the bovine imagery in the second half of the line, which they connect to El, resulting in an explicit identification of El as the

36 Neh 9:18 avoids this problem with the singular demonstrative “this” (*zeh*) and a singular verb.

37 Nicolas Wyatt, “Of Calves and Kings: The Canaanite Dimension in the Religion of Israel,” *SJOT* 6 (1992): 79.

38 J. Gerald Janzen, “The Character of the Calf and Its Cult in Exodus 32,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 599–600.

39 The great majority of commentators take Exod 32:1–6 as a unified passage. Noth is a rare exception, dividing vv. 1–4 from v. 5: Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 244–45.

40 For the Balaam narrative as indicative of a continued cult of El in light of the Deir ‘Alla inscription see Baruch A. Levine, “The Balaam Inscription from Deir ‘Alla: Historical Aspects,” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology Jerusalem, April 1984*, ed. Janet Amitai (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 326–39; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland: Doubleday, 2000), 230–34, 263–75. In addition see Wyatt, “Of Calves and Kings,” 83–84; Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 146–48; R. Scott Chalmers, *The Struggle of Yahweh and El for Hosea’s Israel*, HBM 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 57–67.

god of the Exodus. And since the Balaam oracles are among the oldest poems in the First Testament, they predate the Golden Calf texts, so the reservations about innovation there would not apply. Thus, Wesley Toews has claimed on the basis of the Balaam oracles that, “at least some components of earliest Israel could confess that it was El who had brought Israel out of Egypt.”<sup>41</sup>

However, this depends on linking the bovine imagery with El exclusively, and we have already seen that Yahweh is also linked elsewhere to calves and bulls.<sup>42</sup> The parallelism between Num 23:21b and 22 suggest that is the case here as well. In Num 23:21b Yahweh, his god (’ēlōhîm) is with him (i.e., Jacob), just as “’ēl brings them out of Egypt” in v. 22, and each line is followed by a metaphor for the deity’s actions in relationship to the nation, either as a king or a wild ox. Thus, the horns of a wild ox in 22b are those of the deity mentioned in 22a, and that deity is named as Yahweh in 21b. Those who advocate for El in v. 22 reject this connection by taking v. 22 as an insertion duplicated from the parallel in 24:8. But not only does this fail to account for the structural parallels between the two verses,<sup>43</sup> it also discounts the explicit parallel identification of the term ’ēl with Yahweh in Num 23:8. A few try to negate this as well by pointing to the El epithets “Shadday” in parallel with El in Num 24:4 and “Elyon” and “Shadday” in parallel together with El in Num 24:16 and arguing that all instances of El should be treated the same. But those latter texts constitute Balaam’s self-identification as a seer of El, not the identification of the god of the Exodus, which must be done on the basis of Num 23:22 itself, where he is paralleled with Yahweh in v. 21b.

## VII. The Attraction of Yahweh’s Role in the Exodus

Finally, if Toews is correct that the El-worshipping portion of early Israel attributed the Exodus to El, what was the attraction of Yahweh, such that he eventually replaced El, but not before taking over El’s characteristics and qualities?<sup>44</sup> Yahweh must offer something to the El-worshippers that El did not, namely the idea of a god who intervenes for slaves to set them free. But if the numerically superior El-group thought that El rather than Yahweh liberated the slaves, why would they accept Yahweh as their chief deity? It would make far more sense, in that scenario, for Yahweh to be sublimated to El. Yahweh replaced El as the national deity

41 Wesley I. Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel Under Jeroboam I*, SBLMS 47 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 46. He acknowledges, however, that “there can be no doubt that from very early times the god who brought Israel from Egypt was revered under the name Yahweh,” before adding that some “revered *this* god under the name El” (emphasis added).

42 Albright connects the ox reference in the second half of the verse to Jacob, which is appealing in light of the references to Jacob in vv. 21a and 23, as well as Joseph being described with “the horns of a wild ox” in Deut 33:17, albeit with different Hebrew words than here.

43 Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22–24): La prose et les “Oracles”*, ÉBib, Ns 4 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1985), 286, 291, 374.

44 Cf. independently Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 117.

precisely because the Exodus story became the dominant paradigm for the nation that emerged from the combination of those two groups. But if the Exodus, the very action that differentiates Yahweh from El, was just as easily attributed to El, there was no need for Yahweh. The fact that Yahweh did become dominant in ancient Israelite religion indicates that he, not El, was always and everywhere considered the God of the Exodus.