The Idolatrous God Elkenah

The Book of Abraham tells how Abraham’s kinsfolk worshipped false gods. One of these was “the god of Elkenah” (Abr. 1:6). When Abraham preached against the worship of this god, he said that his kinsfolk “hearkened not unto [his] voice, but endeavored to take away [his] life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah” (v. 7). Not only did the priest try to take Abraham’s life, but “this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time, . . . because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone, therefore they were killed upon this altar” (v. 11). Fortunately, the angel of the Lord delivered Abraham out of the priest’s hands before he could be sacrificed (vv. 15–20; Facsimile 1).

What do we know about the ancient god Elkenah? No deity of that name is mentioned in the King James Bible, but in the last century archaeologists have unearthed evidence of his worship. Elkenah is very likely the shortened form of the name of the Canaanite god ʾel-qoneh-ḥaʾreṣ, meaning “God who created the earth” (or “God, creator of the earth”).

1. The name Elkanah appears in the KJV Bible as a masculine personal name for humans. It is, for example, the name of the prophet Samuel’s father (1 Sam. 1:1, 4, 8, 19, 21, 23). A form of the name appears in the Hebrew Bible as a divine epithet (for example, Gen. 14:19, 22), but in the KJV it is translated (“God, possessor of heaven and earth”) as opposed to transliterated as a proper name/epithet (ʾēl ʾelyôn qōnēḥ šāmayîm wāʾāreṣ). The personal name Elkanah in the Bible is derived from this divine name/epithet. Compare N. Avigad, “Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1971 (Third Preliminary Report),” Israel Exploration Journal 22, no. 4 (1972): 195–96.

Among the ancient Hittites living in Asia Minor he was known as Elkunirsha.³

Originally a Canaanite deity, his worship spread to the Hittite capital of Hattusaha in northern Turkey, to Karatepe near the border of modern Turkey and Syria, to Palmyra in inland Syria, to Jerusalem, and to Leptis Magna in Libya. All told, Elkunirsha was worshipped for more than 1,500 years—from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ.⁴

We know something about Elkunirsha (Elkenah) from a Canaanite myth that was preserved by the Hittites.⁵ Unfortunately, the clay tablets containing this myth are broken, so we do not have all the story. One scholar summarized the story as follows: “Ašertu, the wife of Elkunirša, attempts to seduce Ba’al [the storm god]. The Storm-god reveals everything to her husband and insults her on his inspiration. Thirsting for revenge, Ašertu regains the favor of her husband who then lets her do whatever she likes with Ba’al. The goddess Anat now comes on the scene. Having overheard the conversation between Elkunirša and Ašertu, she warns Ba’al.”⁶

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⁵. “Although the particular events of this tale are not known from the mythological tablets recovered at Ugarit, the story certainly belongs to the corpus of northern Syrian myths which they represent.” Gary Beckman, “Elkuniša and Ašertu (1.55),” in The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 149; compare Heinrich Otten, “Ein kanaänäischer Mythus aus Bogazköy,” Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung 1 (1953): 125–50.

⁶. Popko, Religions of Asia Minor, 128. See also Beckman, “Elkuniša and Ašertu (1.55),” 149.
Then the text unfortunately breaks off. What the evidence appears to indicate, however, is that, along with the other deities in the text, the god Elkenah mentioned in the Book of Abraham has very likely been identified in the ancient world.

Further Reading


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