

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,¹ 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 *’el-qoneh-ha-areš*, meaning “God who created the earth” (or “God, creator of the earth”).²

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 (*’ēl ’elyōn qōnēh šāmayim wā-āreš*). 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.

2. W. Röellig, “El-Creator-Of-The-Earth,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 280–81; Kevin Barney, “On Elkenah as Canaanite El,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 22–35.

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 Hattusha in northern Turkey, to Karatepe near the border of modern Turkey and Syria, to Palmyra in inland Syria, to Jerusalem, and to Lep-tis 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

3. Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, Eisenbrauns, 2021), 86; Ben H. L. van Gessel, *Onomasticon of the Hittite Pantheon* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1998), 1:63; Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 82–83; Maciej Popko, *Religions of Asia Minor* (Warsaw: Academic Publications Dialog, 1995), 128; and N. Wyatt, “Asherah,” in der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 101.

4. Patrick D. Miller Jr. “El, the Creator of Earth,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 239 (1980): 43–46; F. O. Hvidberg-Hansen, “Uni-Ashtarte and Tanit-Iuno Caelestis: Two Phoenician Goddesses of Fertility Reconsidered from Recent Archaeological Discoveries,” in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean. University of Malta, 2–5 September 1985*, ed. Anthony Bonanno (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner Publishing, 1985), 170–71.

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, “Elkunriša 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 kanaänischer Mythos aus Boğazköy,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 1 (1953): 125–50.

6. Popko, *Religions of Asia Minor*, 128. See also Beckman, “Elkunriša 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,⁷ the god Elkenah mentioned in the Book of Abraham has very likely been identified in the ancient world.

Further Reading

Barney, Kevin. "On Elkenah as Canaanite El." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 22–35.

Gee, John. "Four Idolatrous Gods in the Book of Abraham." *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 133–52.

Pike, Dana M. "Idolatrous Gods Referenced in Abraham 1." In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 164. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

7. John Gee, "Four Idolatrous Gods in the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 133–52. This is especially remarkable considering that contemporaries of Joseph Smith criticized the names of the idolatrous gods given in Abraham 1 and Facsimile 1 as being "fanciful." "Mormonism; or, New Mohammedanism in England and America," *Dublin University Magazine* 21, no. 123 (March 1843): 297.