

Was there a God Named Elyon? A Reevaluation of the Evidence

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author evaluates the suggestion that an independent deity named Elyon existed in antiquity (posited recently by Anna Elise Zerneck). The evidence, stemming primarily from KAI 222 and Philo of Byblos, examined in some detail, is found to be lacking. Instead, the infamous “Elioun” of Philo of Byblos is likely a manifestation of the god Adonis from Byblos, while the phrase ‘l w’lyn in KAI 222 is found to probably be a waw explicativum, thus meaning “El who is most high.” As such, there is no convincing, unambiguous evidence that a separate deity named “Elyon” ever existed in the ancient Near East.

Keywords: Elyon, Deuteronomy 32:8–9, El, Philo of Byblos, KAI 222, Elioun, Adonis, waw explicativum

INTRODUCTION

Confusion has existed for some time on whether there was an independent deity named Elyon (from Hebrew *‘lywn*) in the ancient Near East. Interpreting *‘lywn* and cognates (*‘lyn* in Aramaic) as an epithet (“Most High”) sees it as a reference point to other deities, primarily El or Yahweh, depending on context.¹ However, interpreting *‘lywn* as the name of a distinct deity could have us read passages such as Deut. 32:8–9 as having two or even three named deities originally.² As such, the possibility of an independent god named Elyon could have extensive ramifications on the interpretation of early biblical texts such as Deut. 32:8–9 as well as Ps. 82 and other passages throughout the Hebrew Bible.

¹ See Christopher M. Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy: A Response to Michael Heiser’s Interpretation of Deut. 32:8–9,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 13, no. 1 (2022): 76–94 for discussion of the epithet in various contexts.

² This depends on what one assumes the initial reading of Deut. 32:8 is. For the variant readings, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 248 and Julie Ann Duncan, “A critical edition of Deuteronomy manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV: 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^d, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^f, 4QDt^g,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 1989.

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Anna Elise Zernecke is a recent defender of the thesis that there was an independent deity named Elyon, despite the sparseness of the available evidence.³ The primary evidence of this is gathered from Philo of Byblos (*apud* Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 1.10.15–16) and the Sfire I Treaty (KAI 222 lines 7–13).⁴ Zernecke is not the only one to assert the existence of an independent Elyon based on these texts.⁵ However, in my view Zernecke and others miss numerous profound data points, which undermine the entire thesis that any such deity ever existed in antiquity. Instead, the term likely only existed as a title applied to whichever god was considered the patron or highest deity of their respective pantheons in various geographic regions and their various cults. In what follows, I provide several considerations against Zernecke and company's claims that such a deity existed and instead propose that the two primary sources we have for this assertion likely refer to other gods or are grammatical variations.

THE PHOENICIAN HISTORY OF PHILO OF BYBLOS

³ Anna Elise Zernecke, "Nomina nuda tenemus: The God Elyon ('lyn)," in *Naming and Mapping the Gods of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Thomas Galoppin et al. (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2022), 71–88.

⁴ Notably, Zernecke neglects the Arabic text Jamme 889, see A. Jamme, "Inscription Ruprestre et Graffites Qatabanites Photographies Par Le Major M. D. Van Lessen," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 37, no. 3/4 (1962): 231–41. While not likely referring to a separate deity by that name (contra Jamme), as it is a potential title of a number of other gods in South Arabia, this is still an unfortunate oversight. Cognate titles are used in the late Sabaic period for Rḥmn, see Ja 1028. Also the god Rḏw, see BS 491 in Ahmad Al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 37. Cataloguing is according to the digital *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions*, see <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=0&collId=0&navId=0>. The CSAI translation of Ja 889 renders the term 'ln as the name of a month of the Middle Sabaic calendar. The term 'lyn appears as a proper name of a human man in YM 14556 (Central Qatabanic) and as a patronymic in MNAO 10326 (Central Middle Sabaic). The evidence is slim that this was ever the proper name of a deity, however. Even the presence of the god El is questionable save for a few inscriptions, see Aren M. Wilson-Wright, "Yahweh's Kin: A Comparative Linguistic and Mythological Analysis of 'The Children of God' in the Hebrew Bible," in *Where is the Way to the Dwelling of Light?: Studies in Genesis, Job and Linguistics in Honor of Ellen van Wolde*, ed. Pierre van Hecke, and Hanneke van Loon (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 40–64, 49. There are around fourteen inscriptions that seem to mention "daughters of El," along with others mentioning a temple dedicated to him. Meanwhile, there is no widespread or noteworthy attestation of a deity named 'lyn here, and even Jamme is forced to admit this is a "previously unknown name of a god" in his English commentary on the text, see A. Jamme, "South Arabian Inscriptions," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James W. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 663–70, 670.

⁵ Among others see Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel: From the Beginnings to the Exodus and Covenant of Sinai*, vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 275; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*, 2nd rev. ed. (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995), 75; Christoph Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 60 writes "Der mesopotamische Raum ist somit erst mit den westsemitischen Göttern 'El und 'Elyon eindeutig verlassen"; Caroline Jacoba Louise Kloos, *Yhwh's Combat with the Sea* (Amsterdam: G. A. van Oorschot, 1986), 207; G. Levi Della Vida, "El 'Elyon in Genesis 14:18–20," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 1 (1944): 1–9; Rémi Lack, "Les Origines de 'Elyon', le Tres-Haut, Dans la Tradition Culturelle D'Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1962): 56. John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 21 is particularly favorable to the idea of there being an independent deity Elyon, regarding KAI 222 as "prima facie" evidence for this view. Paul Mosca, "Ugarit and Daniel 7: A Missing Link," *Biblica* 67, no. 4 (1986): 512–13, n. 60 identifies the 'lyn of KAI 222 with Hadad for which the evidence is scant at best.

Numerous problems pervade any attempt to identify the deity “Elioun” (deriving from *‘lywn*) from Philo of Byblos’ account as being an independent god, functioning under that name. Philo wrote (ca. late first or second century CE):

Among their contemporaries was a certain Elioun, called Most High, and a woman called Berouth, who settled the area around Byblos. From these were born Terrestrial Native, subsequently called Ouranos (Heaven). Because of his superlative beauty, the element above us was given the name “heaven,” from him. A sister, who was called Ge (Earth), was born for him from the previously mentioned individuals. “Because of her beauty,” he says, “they call the earth by the same name after her. The Father of these, Most High, became an object of worship after he died in an encounter with beasts. His children performed funeral libations and sacrifices for him.”⁶

Zernecke claims that “Philo’s Elioun most probably is an independent deity of his own.”⁷ She further notes there appear to be some parallels to an earlier Hittite–Hurrian myth, the Kumarbi Cycle (CTH 344), previously also noted by Marvin H. Pope.⁸ The evidence for this, however, is extremely flimsy, as have been several other hypotheses.⁹

Firstly, while it is true that the Greek term *hypsistos* is used to translate Elioun, we should not be quick to discount the fact that this term has a long history in Hellenistic syncretic cults that have combined with various ancient Near Eastern cultic beliefs. For instance, the infamous Hypsistarians and their worship of Zeus Hypsistos is well-known and documented.¹⁰ But more pertinently, Zernecke (and others who have argued this point) does not consider the full religious context of the city of Byblos about which Philo is writing here, which specifically would elucidate the fact that Byblos was a melting-pot of varying religious traditions, all syncretizing with each other. One of these was the cult of Osiris, which Lucian (roughly contemporary with Philo of Byblos) was quick to note was identified with the god Adonis (*De Dea Syria* 7). This, in fact, creates a lot of problems in that Osiris

⁶ Translation from Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, Jr., *Philo of Byblos The Phoenician History: Introduction, Critical Text, Translation, Notes* (Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981), 47.

⁷ Zernecke, “Nomina nuda tenemus,” 80.

⁸ Marvin H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 56.

⁹ For example, Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2015), 76 vaguely claims (without giving a source) that Phoenicians used the title *‘lyn* for the god El. This is unevidenced in Phoenician inscriptions. I requested a source for this in an email conversation with Heiser, and he replied (Heiser to Hansen, email, August 19, 2019), “I was thinking of the fragments of Sanchuniathon’s ‘Phoenician Theology’ (Philo of Byblos).” This suggestion is entirely untenable as the god El is mentioned as Elioun’s grandchild in the text.

¹⁰ For a classic introduction, see Colin Roberts, Theodore C. Skeat, and Arthur Darby Nock, “The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos,” *Harvard Theological Review* 29, no. 1 (1936): 39–88. See more recently Pavlos Flourentzos, “New Evidence about Theos Hypsistos cult in Roman Cyprus,” *Cahiers du Centre d’Études Chypriotes* 45 (2015): 383–88.

was also identified by the title *hypsistos*.¹¹ Thus, this is perhaps one reason to identify this Elioun figure with Adonis-Osiris.

Secondly, what makes this a practically certain identification is the fact that this Elioun is said to have been slain by a beast while hunting, which led to his children to perform funeral libations for him. With his death he became an “object of worship.” This is essentially what is reported in all the myths of Adonis. Lucian writes from his own firsthand account:

I did see, however, in Byblos a great sanctuary of Aphrodite of Byblos in which they perform the rites of Adonis, and I learned about the rites. They say, at any rate, that what the boar did to Adonis occurred in their territory. As a memorial of his suffering each year they beat their breasts, mourn, and celebrate the rites. Throughout the land they perform solemn lamentations. When they cease their breast-beating and weeping, they first sacrifice to Adonis as if to a dead person, but then, on the next day, they proclaim that he lives and send him into the air.¹²

We should likewise not discount other recorded versions of the myth found in Greco-Roman literature, which again confirm many of these pieces of information.¹³ This specific element should immediately call into question the authenticity of Elioun in any theogonic listing. As L'Heureux observed, the mode in which Elioun meets his death “is a feature that belongs to the myths of Adonis. The latter is a very widespread archetypal figure who dies while caring for his flocks. He has nothing to do with either theogony or myths of divine kingship.”¹⁴ Adonis-Elioun is placed as the highest deity, with the Heaven and Earth as his children, and then Elus/Kronos as their child, thus giving Phoenician mythology a cursory similarity to Hesiod's own theogony.¹⁵

¹¹ Jeremy L. Williams, *Criminalization in Acts of the Apostles: Race, Rhetoric, and the Prosecution of the Early Christian Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 176. Notably, Baal Shamem also receives this title inadvertently, see Albert I. Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 185. This comes from a bilingual inscription which identifies Zeus Hypsistos with Baal Shamem. Oden identifies this as a manifestation of the god El, see Robert A. Oden, Jr., “Ba'al Šamēm and 'El,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1977): 457–73. If this were the case, we can rule him out as being the god Elioun, due to the genealogical separation.

¹² Translation from Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, Jr., *De Dea Syria* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 13.

¹³ Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 186 likewise raises awareness to Elioun's death by beasts evoking the “dying and reviving gods” motif. See also Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, 56; Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy,” 84. For other Greco-Roman accounts of Adonis, see Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.14.4; Theocritus, *Idyll* 15.129–43; Cyril of Alexandria, *On Isaiah* 18.1–2; Eustathius, *Com. Odyssey* 11.590; Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 18.2–3; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History* 22.9.14–5, etc. See John Granger Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 87–110 for detailed translations and commentary on these and more.

¹⁴ C. E. L'Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ba'al and Rephaim* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 44.

¹⁵ That Ouranos is associated with the blood-red river in Philo of Byblos, while it is Adonis in Lucian is explicable from the fact that there were apparently differing theories and conjectures as to why the river turned red (which was actually due to soil deposits) in circulation at different temples, see Baumgarten, *The*

This all aligns well with what Philo of Byblos records: (1) Adonis and Elioun are both killed by wild beasts; (2) their deaths cause them to become an “object of worship”; (3) funeral libations are made by their worshipers; (4) sacrifices are made to them. As Lucian likewise notes that the Byblians identified their Adonis with Osiris (*De Dea Syria* 7¹⁶), we probably have a reason why the title “Elioun” came about. That is, it was formal to call Osiris “most high,” which became associated with Adonis in their conflation. Thus, both the Greek *hypsistos* and the Semitic *ʾlywn* are being applied as they were likely both in circulation during the Hellenistic era of Byblos.¹⁷ We can also surmise, following L’Heureux, that Philo’s own allegiance to Byblos likely played a part in him then placing the patron of Byblos (Adonis-Osiris) at the head of the pantheon along with Berouth, the eponymous deity of Beirut, the city that Sanchuniathon (whom Philo pretends to be translating into Greek) is associated with traditionally.¹⁸ As such, we have a number of reasons for thinking that “Elioun” is likely here an accretion that Philo makes in his attempt to Hellenize the Phoenician pantheon with a Hesiod-like theogony. It is, arguably, a fiction with no real pertinence on our understanding of more antique Canaanite pantheons.

Other problems persist in the theogony. Firstly, it lacks any known equivalent elsewhere in Phoenician, Israelite, Punic, Ugaritic, etc. texts.¹⁹ The parallel to the Kumarbi myth, while interesting, is separated by a span of over a thousand years between Philo and CTH 344. While it is certainly possible that Philo may rely on an earlier tradition, Zernecke provides no convincing evidence this is the case.²⁰ More likely, Philo is dependent on Hesiod and simply places Adonis-Elioun at the head of his theogony since he was the most principal deity of the city of Byblos.²¹ The marginal overlaps occur due to the influx of Indo-European mythos into Philo’s own work via Hesiod, also creating superficial similarities to the Kumarbi epic. Notably, Philo of Byblos and all our other broadly “Canaanite” texts never refer to any conflict between Baal and El, which would be required for any closer similarity

Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos, 212. As such, this difference is negligible as there were multiple explanations in existence for the so-called Adonis river running red.

¹⁶ Notably, other authors made this connection between Osiris and Adonis as well, including with the Gardens of Adonis, see Cook, *Empty Tomb*, 101–2.

¹⁷ As Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 184 notes, *hypsistos* is likely just a simple translation here.

¹⁸ L’Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods*, 44. Porphyry calls him “Sanchuniathon of Beirut” (trans. Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 41). Athenaeus considered him to be from Tyre (Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 45). A fifteenth century MS from Madrid also coheres with the Beirut identification (Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 47). Philo of Byblos is also said to have had a student from Beirut (Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 31).

¹⁹ There was some argument about a deity called *ʾiluʾibi* in Ugaritic texts, but this appears to be a hypostasis of the god El. See Gregorio del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1999), 73–74 and Johannes C. de Moor, “El, the Creator,” in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. Gary Rendsburg et al. (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1980), 184–185.

²⁰ Zernecke, “Nomina nuda tenemus,” 82.

²¹ Robert A. Oden Jr., “Philo of Byblos and Hellenistic Historiography,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (1978): 114–126; Zernecke, “Nomina nuda tenemus,” 79; J. L. Lightfoot, “Lucian, Philo of Byblos, and Ps.-Meliton,” in *A Companion to the Hellenistic and Roman Near East*, ed. Ted Kaizer (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 50; James Barr, “Philo of Byblos and his ‘Phoenician History,’” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 57, no. 1 (1974): 17–68.

to the Kumarbi epic.²² As such, the similarities are likely just coincidental or the result of Hesiod and the Kumarbi epic, stemming from a more common Indo-European theogonic legend, which Philo is borrowing and modifying.

As a result, Zernecke's postulations on Philo of Byblos are unconvincing. This deity has his closest parallels to Adonis-Osiris who was among the foremost deities worshiped in Byblos and whose death cult was widespread.²³ The titles *'lywn* and *hypsistos* probably just came about together as the cults comingled (hence Philo's translation of *'lywn* as *hypsistos*). The *hypsistos*/Elioun title was associated with his post-death elevation into the afterlife/heavens that the Byblians celebrated, as Lucian described (*De Dea Syria* 6). As such, we can discount that Philo attests to any independent deity, functioning under the name of *'lywn*. Instead, Philo is simply using one of the titles of reverence for Adonis. The reading of Elioun as an independent deity only overcomplicates the matter with a completely unattested cultus elsewhere, as there is no other Phoenician (much less Byblian) evidence to suggest a deity named *'lywn* (or Elioun) existed outside of Philo of Byblos. While an argument from silence, positing that Elioun is equivalent to Adonis is far more parsimonious with the recorded mythological evidence.

THE SFIRE I TREATY

The Sfire I Treaty (KAI 222) is the only other extrabiblical evidence that any deity named "Elyon" might have existed independently. While listing deities who stand as witnesses to the treaty's efficacy, a curious section occurs, which I translate thusly:

In the presence of the Sibetti, in the presence of *'l w'lyn*, in the presence of Heav[en and Earth, in the presence of Abyss] /and Springs, in the presence of Day and Night.

The list is unfortunately fragmentary, though. Zernecke notes that as this follows the Assyrian treaty style, it can be fairly easily reconstructed due to having several close parallels.²⁴ The reconstructed elements are in brackets above.

²² Contra those who have previously seen Baal and El as in conflict in Ugaritic texts (i.e. Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1969)), there is no convincing evidence of any such mythological violent conflict, see L'Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods*, 4–40; Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 338–39. As Olmo Lete observes, the onomastic evidence alone seems to preclude any such concept.

²³ Tryggve Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 133–54; Hermann Detering, *Christi Brüder: Wie heidnische Mythen das Christusbild prägten* (Independently Published, 2017), 205–82; Cook, *Empty Tomb*, 87–110 though I do not agree with attempts at revitalizing the antique "dying and rising" god typology. Contra Mettinger, see Mark S. Smith, "The Death of 'Dying and Rising Gods' in the Biblical World: An Update, With Special Reference to Baal in the Baal Cycle," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12, no. 2 (1998): 257–313. See also Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁴ Zernecke, "Nomina nuda tenemus," 74.

There are a number of possibilities for how to understand this combination of *ʾl wʾlyn*. Zernecke first makes several astute observations.²⁵ The list is organized in deity pairs primarily and lists Levantine rather than Assyrian gods. Zernecke makes much of the supposed overlaps between this treaty and those of Hittite tradition. She additionally finds that at least the god El seems to function as an ancestral deity and is not directly involved in earthly political affairs, which would explain him beginning the natural pairs.²⁶ Unfortunately, the evidence is simply lacking for thinking that *wʾlyn* indicates a separate deity in and of itself in my view.²⁷ There are a few possibilities for how to interpret this phrase:²⁸

1. El and Elyon are distinct deities.
2. The epithet Elyon splits from El as a distinct hypostasis.
3. This is a double name, akin to Kothar-wa-Khasis, of one deity.
4. Elyon is an epithet of El, and the *waw* is a *waw explicativum*.²⁹

Zernecke and company would of course ascribe to the first point. However, as there is a complete lack of any other evidence for any separate deity *ʾly(w)n* existing in Semitic pantheons, I would consider this the least probable, followed by the second point for which there is also a lack of evidence. This leaves the possibility of a double name or of a *waw explicativum*. In this case, the latter seems to be the most likely.³⁰ While double names are attested on occasion, they are particularly rare and, aside from this singular instance, we

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 76–78.

²⁷ This is contra Day, *Yahweh*, 21 who claims, “Prima facie the eighth-century BCE Aramaic Sefire treaty also represents Elyon as a distinct deity from El, since ‘El and Elyon’ occur together.” Day quickly is forced to backtrack this, noting that it could be a double name equivalent to Kothar-wa-Khasis, and states, “Whether or not they [El and Elyon] are the same deity, since Elyon was apparently the creator, which was also the case with El, it would appear that these two gods were functionally equivalent” (Ibid.). Assuming they were functionally equivalent, one would seriously have to ask why two such deities would even exist, especially since the evidence of any independent “Elyon” is so sparse as to be practically nonexistent. Day’s suggestion that Elioun in Philo of Byblos is an independent deity suffers from the same reasons as Zernecke. As such, we can discount Day’s claims.

²⁸ List of possibilities derived from Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 51.

²⁹ For more on the *waw explicativum* see Patrick Wilson, “More Cases of Waw Explicativum,” *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 1 (1994): 125–128; David W. Baker, “Further Examples of the Waw Explicativum,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30, no. 2 (1980): 129–136.

³⁰ For this suggestion, see Patrick D. Miller and Eric E. Elnes, “Elyon,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 295. This position was previously upheld by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 310. Mark S. Smith, “Kothar wa-Hasis, the Ugaritic Craftsman God,” PhD diss., Yale University, 1985, 82–83, 151 n. 177; Zdravko Stefanovic, *The Aramaic of Daniel in the Light of Old Aramaic* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 54; Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, 55; L’Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods*, 45–46; is a possibility given by Robert Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom: How Scribes Invented the Biblical King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38; C. L. Seow, *Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David’s Dance* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 52.

would have no other evidence of such an occurrence with El and the title *ʾlyn*. To the contrary, all other evidence seems to indicate that this was a title of the deity El or other deities and solely functioned in such a role.³¹ As such, we are most justified in seeing this as

³¹ For a more comprehensive overview, see Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy.” The evidence includes Gen. 14:18–22 where the title “Elyon” is one of El. Note that v.22 has been interpolated to add the tetragrammaton, see Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 261. Yahweh’s name is absent from 1QapGen, Syr, and LXX renditions of the passage, see Miller and Elmes, “Elyon,” 297. An Ammonite Ostrakon contains the personal name “El most high” or *ʾlyʾl*, see Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem: CARTA Jerusalem, 2008), 381–82. Likewise, we can point to Isa. 14:12–15 and Num. 24:15–19 which most likely pertain to the god El, see Meindert Dijkstra, “Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 1 (1995): 43–64; Ulf Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82, no. 2 (1970): 187–208; Day, *Yahweh*, 109–16; Hugh Rowland Page Jr., *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 132; Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy,” 88. Another noteworthy one is from Kuntillet ʾAjrud where El is called the “holy one over the gods” (*qšdš ʾly ʾlm*) with *qšdš* apparently being a misspelling of *qdš*. For discussion of this text, see Shmuel Ahituv, Esther Eshel, and Zeʾev Meshel, “The Inscriptions,” in *Kuntillet ʾAjrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah–Sinai Border*, ed. Zeʾev Meshel, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2010): 73–142 and Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 328 who notes the possibility I list here for a reading of the inscription as indicating El’s supremacy. Here *ʾly* functions as a part of a greater epithet. While contentious, there may also be evidence of the title *ʾly(n)* being used for the god El in South Arabian inscriptions, see Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El”; Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*: 184; Jacob A. Naude, “The Name Allah,” PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 1971, 181–82 n. 36 who find this in various inscriptions bearing the phrase *wʾl tʾly*. Naude notes that this is structurally similar to the later Arabic and classical Islamic phrase *allah taʾalay* (“Allah, he is exalted”). The South Arabian phrases are, however, highly contested, see A. G. Loundine, “‘Il Tres-Haut’ dans les inscriptions sud-arabes,” *Le Museon* 76 (1963): 207–9; Alessandra Avanzini, *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions I–III: Qatabanic, Marginal Qatabanic, Awsanite Inscriptions* (Pisa: Università di Pisa, 2004), 55 who interpret the phrasing (*wʾl tʾly*) as denoting a contract limitation, i.e., “and there shall be no violation thereof.” There are also personal names such as *ʾlyʾl*, *ʾʾl*, and *ʾʾl* which may be a reflex of “Il most high,” see G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 920. The South Arabian deity Il is attested in Sabaic, Ḥaḍramitic, Minaic, and Qatabanian inscriptions, see Jacques Ryckmans, “Le panthéon de l’Arabie du sud préislamique: état des problèmes et brève synthèse,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 206, no. 2 (1989): 151–70, 155, see Wilson–Wright, “Yahweh’s Kin,” 49. A reflex of this is possibly seen in the Islamic phrase *ʾal aʾla* (*Qurʾan* 87:1). F. Koestra, “The Taymanitic Onomasticon,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 28 (2017): 254–63 lists a potential example of *ʾʾl* as a personal elistic name (260). As such, there might be some minor corroborative evidence in Arabian materials, particularly from onomastic data. Lastly, we can probably also list here Ps. 82 and Deut. 32:8–9, which most scholars take as referring to El as “most high” again and with good reason, see Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy”; Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 139–43; Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Knopf, 2022), 20–21; David Frankel, “El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6–8,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10, no. 16 (2010): 1–24; James S. Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh’s Appropriation of Baal* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 26. This view has become steadily dominant since Otto Eissfeldt, “El and Yahweh,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1956): 25–37. See Hansen, “The Many Gods of Deuteronomy,” 77–81 for a more detailed overview and bibliographic details. The title is only twice applied to the god Baal at Ugarit, see Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 185. Numbers 24 likely also preserves Elyon as a title of El, see Chris Hansen, “The Named Gods of Deuteronomy: Additional Comments on Deuteronomy 32:1–43,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 14, no. 1 (2023): 141–153. Note that there have been a few other suggested arguments that are simply incorrect. Brian Schmidt, “Al,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 15 claims that the title is used in Ugaritic texts for the god El specifically in KTU 1.111. This is not the case, see Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 90–93. Tangentially, we might also refer to the cognate *elu* in Akkadian which refers to the god *Ea* as “most high” or “exalted,” see A. Leo Oppenheim (ed.), *The Assyrian Dictionary*, Vol. 4 E (Chicago: Oriental

a *waw explicativum* meant to maintain the pair parallelism but reading “El who is most high” essentially. Making this even more likely is that there appears to be another *waw explicativum* earlier in the list (*šmš wmr*).³² The usage of a *waw explicativum* would maintain the “pair” aesthetic and parallelism when it is read, but *w’lyn* would still function as an epithet.

The reason for El’s placement at the head of the natural pairs could potentially be cosmogonic as well. Notably, as Michael Barré notes, the Sfire I Treaty also parallels the cosmogonic pairs at the start of creation in Genesis 1.³³

Table 1: Cosmogonic Pairs Comparison

KAI 222A.11–12	Gen. 1:1, 2, 5
<i>šmy[n w’rq</i> (Heaven and Earth)	<i>’t hšmym w’t h’rš</i> (“The Heavens and the Earth”)
<i>mš]lh wmr’ym</i> (Abyss and Springs)	<i>thwm [...] hmym</i> (“Deep [...] waters”)
<i>ywm wlylh</i> (Day and Night)	<i>ywm [...] lyh</i> (“Day [...] Night”)

This would likewise parallel El Most High’s frequent description as the “creator [or possessor] of [heaven and] earth” in onomastic, epigraphic, and textual data.³⁴ If this is

Institute, 1958), 89, 111. This is notable particularly since *Ea* was occasionally conflated with El in various places, such as the Karatepe Inscription (KAI 26), and was also merged in Berossus, see Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts*, 43–45, 72. For more on Ea/Enki’s assimilation with El, see Peeter Espak, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2010), 81–85.

³² See Miller and Elnes, “Elyon,” 295.

³³ Michael Barré, *The God-List in the Treaty Between Hannibal and Philip V of Macedonia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 26–27. We can further observe this follows a number of parallels in other ancient Near Eastern creation narratives as well. See Berossus, *History of Babylonia*, F1. For translation, see Gerald Verbrugghe and John Wickersham, *Berossos and Manetho: Introduced and Translated*, 1st paperback ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 45. Compare also the numerous other creation myths helpfully translated in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 94–95, 98–101, 169–77, 352–59. It should also be noted that Heaven and Earth follow El in one Ugaritic ritual text. See KTU 1.148.5 per Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 131. Whether this reflects the cosmogonic sequence is debatable. Notably, they are invoked as “earth and heaven,” which is also in reverse order from other texts.

³⁴ For epigraphic data, see KAI 26 III:18–19; KAI 129.1. See KAI 266 possibly as well per reconstruction by L’Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods* 1979, 69. There is an incantation plaque, which has El over heaven and earth and also refers to him as the “eternal one.” See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 17. The Hittite deity proper name “Elkunirša” is derived from the title *’l qn’rs* or “El creator of earth.” See I. J. Gelb, “The Early History of West Semitic Peoples,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 15, no. 1 (1961): 27–47 and Harry A. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, Writings from the Ancient World 2, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 109–10. The name *Elkanah* (i.e., 1 Sam. 1:1–23) seems to be a reflex of this name and title (Day, *Yahweh*, 20). Variations of the names *’lqn*, *qn’l*, and even *’lqnirš* are attested in the onomastic data. See Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 40; Javier Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 26–27 (Palmyra attesting to *Elqonera*, *Conmarus*, and *’lqnir*). See also Charles Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2000), 429. Likewise, it even seems to be attested in Jerusalem. See Patrick D. Miller, “El, Creator of Earth,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 239 (1980): 43–46. A similar title may be ascribed to Baal Shamem. See André Caquot, “Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra (V),” *Syria* 40, no. 1/2 (1963): 1–16. Note that some have contended that *qn(y)* and cognates never indicate “creation.” See Ryan Thomas, “אל קנה ארץ: Creator, Begetter, or Owner of the Earth?” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 48 (2017): 451–521. Thomas contends that this language denotes “ownership of the land” essentially, but that the

correct, what we may be seeing in the Sfire I Treaty is more than just the evocation of the natural pairs but specifically a recalling of the creation of the world itself as bearing witness to the Treaty's legitimacy. The Levantine context might make it all the more likely, given its closer parallels to Genesis 1 and 14:18–22. In short, there is little reason for thinking that Sfire I attests to an independent deity named Elyon.

While KAI 222 is the best evidence for any deity named *'ly(w)n* having existed independent of El, it is nonetheless ambiguous, and good reason exists for rejecting this hypothesis entirely. Instead, Zernecke's thesis hinges on a number of assumptions that are unwarranted given the available data. Comparison with Gen. 14:18–22, KAI 26 III:18–19 and KAI 129.1 (along with the rather extensive amount of onomastic data) seems to confirm El's status both as having received the title *'ly(w)n* (along with cognates) as well as being the progenitor of the Heaven and Earth in ancient cosmogonies. We should, as a result, see KAI 222's *w'lyn* as an extension meant to maintain the pairing motif but with the *waw* functioning as a *waw explicativum*.

CONTRADICTIONARY SOURCES

One other notable element, which Zernecke seems to overlook, is that the two sources she claims attest to an independent deity named Elyon are inherently contradictory in quite insurmountable ways, specifically in their apparent genealogy. Assuming for a second the two-deity hypothesis is correct, then the Sfire I Treaty has El and Elyon on the same level of authority. Or, perhaps El is even first in order above Elyon, as he is listed as the head, followed by the natural pairs of Heaven and Earth. However, in Philo of Byblos the order is completely different. Elioun and Berouth are first, followed by Ouranos and Ge. El (Elus/Kronos) is the child of Ouranos and Ge in this version of events and a grandchild of Elioun. These seem to be beyond reconciliation, especially if we were to propose that they are both following Hittite models as Zernecke suggested. Additionally, the Hittite/Hurrian Kumarbi parallels are fairly weak. While there was probably a broader Indo-European tradition of a theogonic war among the gods, Philo of Byblos' account clearly inspired by Hesiod has notable deviations from the Hittite account. Elioun, unlike Alalu, is killed by a beast. Alalu is overthrown by Anu, who is overthrown by Kumarbi. Kumarbi is then overthrown by the weather god Teshub. We have here a noteworthy problem: The god Elioun is never usurped unlike his supposedly Hittite/Hurrian equivalent. Lastly, Sfire I's presence of Abyss and Springs and Day and Night are completely absent in Philo and the Kumarbi epic. Finally, the castration element found in Philo of Byblos signals an indebtedness to Hesiod's *Theogony*.³⁵ The amount of late Hellenistic influence and extremely different geo-political climate that Philo of Byblos lived in, and his clear literary influences, should mean that the contents of his works, whatever their worth, be taken with extreme caution in attempting any reconstruction of what ancient Phoenicians believed and practiced.

supreme god El was likely still viewed as creator. This was, however, tied up in ambiguous or "agnostic" terminology. Thomas, "Creator, Begetter, or Owner of the Earth?" 495 and Oden, "Ba'al Šamēm and 'Ēl," both identify this Baal Shamem with El.

³⁵ Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 211.

As such, in my view the Kumarbi Cycle is simply incompatible with the data from Sfire I and from Philo of Byblos, and Philo and Sfire I appear to be incompatible with each other. At this juncture, we must ask why at all presume that these sources are even presenting data of the same phenomenon. Here, these two “Elyons” seem to refer to different figures altogether, given they are quite disparate, which only seems to confirm the suspicion that this term is purely functional as a cultic title of a deity and not a proper name of an independent figure.

CONCLUSIONS

In opposition to Zernecke and others who have argued that there was an independent and nebulous deity named Elyon in the ancient Near East, there seems to be convincing evidence to suggest no such deity ever existed. The term *ʾly(w)n* and the similar *ʾl* and *ʾly* were very likely only ever used as epithets of other deities who were regarded as national or personal patrons and thus considered the “highest” or “most high” in those specific contexts. Who received these epithets was likely regionally based. The most common ascription of this title is to the god El and to Yahweh.³⁶ However, it was likely also used of Adonis in Byblos. Zernecke’s thesis lacks any convincing data to suggest any such deity proper named *ʾly(w)n* existed in antiquity, and it is often predicated on multiple assumptions and links between two texts separated by hundreds of years. Furthermore, simpler and less enigmatic interpretations are quite possible (and with some evidentiary support) that run counter to the idea of any independent deity named Elyon existing.

This means that in interpreting similar titles in biblical passages, we should not be seeing them as indicative of a separate deity “Elyon” but instead likely should be reading them as epithets, pertaining to the Israelite pantheon, i.e., initially the god El, with the title subsequently being applied to Yahweh.³⁷ If there was any god named Elyon, then the evidence is simply too sparse, vague, and inconsistent to make any concrete or secure conclusions as to their existence. Hypothesizing the existence of such a deity only creates more problems and questions than it ever resolves, and the few answers it provides do not seem more satisfactory than other, more parsimonious explanations. Instead, it seems far more reasonable to view *ʾly(w)n* as having only been an epithet of various other gods.

³⁶ Further confirming this is a title is its usage for other deities, see: Allah (found in epithets like *ʾal aʾla* in *Qurʾan* 87.1); Shamash (personal name *šmsʾly*), see Harding, *An Index and Concordance*, 920–21; ʾAmm (personal name *ʾmʾly*), see Harding, *An Index and Concordance*, 920–21; al-ʾUzza (RES 4829 calls her *ltnʾly*); Baal (KTU 1.16:III.6, 8); Rḏw (BS 491 has *rḏw ʾl*); and finally also Rḏw, Nhy, or *sʾmsʾl* (HU 789e *mtʾly* “exalted one” but probably *sʾmsʾl* and *ʾly* are epithets of Nhy). Lastly, we can mention Rḥmn (Ja 1028) is called *ʾlyn*, but Rḥmn likely refers to the biblical deity.

³⁷ Perhaps also with Baal following suggested emendations of Hosea 7:16 and 11:7 to referring to Baal as *ʾly*, see Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, 185.

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