

THE Elohim: WHO ARE THEY IN PsalmLM 82?

This is a rough paraphrase of the explanation from Dr. Michael S. Heiser on Unseen Ream. Dr. Michael S. Heiser is an American biblical Old Testament scholar and Christian author.

PsalmLM 82 (ESV) — A PsalmLM of Asaph.

1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

2 “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?
Selah

3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.

4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

6 I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;

7 nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”

8 Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!

Definition:

אֱלֹהִים (’ēlōhîm): God, gods, divine beings. Used for gods or divine beings in general as well as for Yahweh.

INTRODUCTION

A question in relation to all this material would be something like this:

“Mike, when you were discussing the word Elohim, some passages talked about Elohim in Yahweh’s council and those Elohim being set over the nations of the world. What is that all about?”

“Well, that idea is found in the OT, specifically in Deut 32:8–9, and the parallel to that passage is Deut 4:19–20. These passages collectively talk about the superiority of Yahweh to other Elohim, and even more specifically it references the judgment that happened at the Tower of Babel, the human rebellion there.

And so God, in Deut 32:8–9, divides up the nations and puts them under the authority of lesser Elohim. And this is before the creation of Israel, which will become an important thought as we progress. But to really sort of understand this and grasp it, we have to go back to Psalm 82.

Elohim IN PsalmLM 82

SINGULAR AND PLURAL Elohim

Here in PsalmLM 82 you'll notice the first word is "God." We have, "God has taken his place"—or taken a stand—"in the divine council."

The word "God" here in the Hebrew text is the word Elohim. We know this is *singular*, referring to the singular God of Israel, because in the Hebrew the verbal that goes with this noun, Elohim, is a singular participle, nitsav, in Hebrew.

So Elohim here is very clearly a reference to the *singular* God of Israel. But the second half of the verse is different. We read, "in the midst of the gods"—in the midst of the Elohim; it's the same Hebrew word again, Elohim—"in the midst of the Elohim, he"—the first Elohim of the verse—"passes judgment."

Now, this second Elohim has to be *plural* in meaning because of the prepositional phrase in Hebrew that precedes it—beqerev, "in the midst of." You can't be "in the midst of" one single individual. Now, some would suggest though that what we have here is a reference to a human council, a council of human beings.

That may sound odd, but it will come up again as we progress through the course and in different places, in different passages we'll discuss. That idea that this is God presiding over a meeting, as it were, of His human judges on earth is really contradicted by passages like Psalm 89.

Elohim AS HEAVENLY BEINGS

If we go to PsalmLM 89 we'll see the same sort of divine council language. We have "the assembly of the holy ones," but notice the holy ones here are meeting, in verse 6, "in the skies," in the heavens.

And we know these holy ones are divine beings because we have a reference to a meeting of the heavenly beings, the *beney elim*—Elim is a plural of el, the word for “god.” So, very clearly here the divine council is something that is set in the heavens, in the skies, not on earth. And so a human explanation for Psalm 82 and the divine council idea, the plural Elohim there just doesn’t work.

CONDEMNING THE Elohim

Now, if we went through Psalm 82 we would also see other evidence that we have, again, a council, an assembly, a bureaucracy of other divine beings, other Elohim. God is judging them, and specifically in the verses that follow verse 1 God is judging them for being corrupt—corruptly administering the nations of the earth that were assigned to them way back in Deut 32:8–9.

They are not enacting the justice that the Creator—their Creator—would have go on on earth. They’ve become corrupt, and so the Psalm is really dealing with how God is going to judge them.

Elohim OVER NATIONS

When we get to verse 6 God says to them, “I said, ‘You are gods.’ ” Here again you’ll notice that we have the word Elohim. So God is again referencing these individuals, these beings that He’s created, that He has set over the nations, who are divine beings. He’s judging them and calling them gods once again.

This verse actually rules out any idea that the plural Elohim in Psalm 82:1 might be a reference to the Trinity. The members of the Trinity are not corrupt, and God isn’t going to judge them. Here in verse 6 He says to these plural Elohim, He says, “You are gods, sons of the Most High.” And then he says, “You’re going to die like men.” Again, the members of the Trinity would not be judged in this way. That would be theologically aberrant to most of what else occurs in the Bible.

At the end of the Psalm the Psalmist says, “Arise, O God, judge the earth; [for] you shall inherit all the nations!” Now, you might ask, “Well, doesn’t God own all the nations anyway?” Well, He does.

We go back in Deut 32 again, which we'll see in a moment, God is the one who is dividing the nations and assigning them to the other Elohim. So He is in control of all the nations. But again, this is just a segue into Deut 32:8–9.

Elohim as “Gods” in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word Elohim lies behind the word “God” in the OT. Several instances of this word are plural, which may seem to indicate polytheism. For this reason, modern English translations often obscure the Hebrew text's references to plural Elohim.

For example, the NASB renders the second Elohim in [Psalm 82:1](#) as “rulers.” Other translations—more faithful to the original Hebrew—opt for “gods” or “divine beings.” However, this usage **does not** imply polytheism.

Several different entities are referred to as Elohim in the OT. Considering this variety provides insight as to how the term should be understood. The Hebrew text of the OT refers to the following as Elohim: Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 1000 times); the members of Yahweh's heavenly council ([Psalm 82](#)); the gods of foreign nations ([1 Kgs 11:33](#)); demons (see [note on Deut 32:17](#)); spirits of the human dead ([1 Sam 28:13](#)); and angels (see [note on Gen 35:7](#)).

This variety demonstrates that the word should not be identified with one particular set of attributes: Elohim is not a synonym for God. We reserve the English “g-o-d” for the God of Israel and His attributes. Despite their usage of Elohim, the biblical writers do not qualitatively equate Yahweh with demons, angels, the human disembodied dead, the gods of the nations, or Yahweh's own council members. Yahweh is unique and above these entities—yet the same term can be used to refer to all of them.

All beings called Elohim in the Hebrew Bible share a certain characteristic: they all inhabit the non-human realm. By nature, Elohim are not part of the world of humankind, the world of ordinary embodiment. Elohim—as a term—indicates residence, not a set of attributes; it identifies the proper domain of the entity it describes.

Yahweh, the lesser gods of His council, angels, demons, and the disembodied dead all inhabit the spiritual world. They may cross over into the human world—as the Bible informs us—and certain humans may be transported to the non-human realm (e.g., prophets; Enoch). But the proper domains of each are two separate and distinct places.

Within the spiritual world, as in the human world, entities are differentiated by rank and power. Yahweh is an Elohim, but no other Elohim is Yahweh.

This is what an orthodox Israelite believed about Yahweh. He was not one among equals; He was unique. The belief that Yahweh is utterly and eternally unique—that there is none like Him—is not contradicted by plural Elohim in the OT.

MICHAEL S. HEISER

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