

Who Are the Elohim?

By Michael Heiser

Psalm 82: God [elohim] stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [elohim]

The word elohim occurs twice in this short verse. Other than the covenant name, Yahweh, it's the most common word in the Old Testament for God. The first use of the word in this verse worked fine. But since I knew my Hebrew grammar, I saw immediately that the second instance needed to be translated as plural. There it was, plain as day: The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly – a pantheon – of other gods.

Does the Bible say there are other gods?

Needless to say, I didn't hear a word of the sermon. My mind was reeling. How was it possible that I'd never seen that before? I'd read through the Bible seven or eight times. I'd been to seminary. I'd studied Hebrew. I'd taught for five years at a Bible college.

What did this do to my theology? I'd always thought – and had taught my students – that any other “gods” referenced in the Bible were just idols. As easy and comfortable as that explanation was, it didn't make sense here. The God of Israel isn't part of a group of idols. But I couldn't picture him running around with other real gods, either. This was the Bible, not Greek mythology.

I immediately set to work trying to find answers. I soon discovered that the ground I was exploring was a place where evangelicals had feared to tread. The explanations I found from evangelical scholars were disturbingly weak, mostly maintaining that the gods (elohim) in the verse were just men – Jewish elders – or that the verse was about the Trinity. I knew neither of those could be correct. Psalm 82 states that the gods were being condemned as corrupt in their administration of the nations of the earth. The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations, and God certainly wouldn't be railing against the rest of the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, for being corrupt. Frankly, the answers just weren't honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.

When I looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship, I discovered that other scholars had churned out dozens of articles and books on Psalm 82 and Israelite religion. They'd left no stone unturned in ferreting out parallels between the psalm and its ideas and the literature of other civilizations of the biblical world – in some cases, matching the psalm's phrases word for word.

Their research brought to light other biblical passages that echoed the content of Psalm 82. I came to realize that most of what I'd been taught about the unseen world in Bible college and seminary had been filtered by English translations or derived from sources like Milton's Paradise Lost.

The rulers of ancient Egypt were called pharaohs. In the language of ancient Egypt, the title was actually two words, per a-a, which meant "great house(hold)." The household concept for the ruling families of ancient Egypt was that of a dynastic bureaucracy. Pharaohs typically had large, extended families. They frequently appointed family members to key positions of authority in their administration. The elite staffing of the king's governing bureaucracy typically came from Pharaoh's household. They were administrators, not lowly messengers.

This concept and structure was well known throughout the ancient world. It spoke of layered authority: a high king, elite administrators who were often related to the king, and low-level personnel who served the higher levels of authority. Everyone in the system was part of the government, but authority and status were tiered.

Several Old Testament passages describe this administrative structure existing in the heavenly realm, as well. Psalm 82 is perhaps the clearest – and perhaps the most startling. The psalm refers to Yahweh's administration as a council. The first verse reads:

"God (elohim) stands in the divine assembly; he administers judgment in the midst of the gods (elohim)."

You no doubt noticed that the word elohim occurs twice in this verse. You also probably recognize elohim as one of God's names, despite the fact that the form of the word is plural. In English we make words plural by adding -s or -es or -ies (rats, horses, stories). In Hebrew, plurals of masculine nouns end with -im.

While the word elohim is plural in form, its meaning can be either plural or singular. Most often (over 2,000 times) in the Hebrew Bible it is singular, referring to the God of Israel. We have words like this in English.

For example, the word sheep can be either singular or plural. When we see "sheep" by itself, we don't know if we should think of one sheep or a flock of sheep. If we put "sheep" into a sentence ("The sheep is lost"), we know that only one sheep is meant since the verb requires a singular subject. Likewise, "The sheep are lost" informs us that the status of more than one sheep is being discussed. Grammar guides us. It's the same with Hebrew.

Psalm 82:1 is especially interesting since elohim occurs twice in that single verse. In Psalm 82:1, the first elohim must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verbal form ("stands"). The second

elohim must be plural, since the preposition in front of it (“in the midst of”) requires more than one. You can’t be “in the midst of” one. The preposition calls for a group—as does the earlier noun, assembly. The meaning of the verse is inescapable: the singular elohim of Israel presides over an assembly of elohim.

A quick read of Psalm 82 informs us that God has called this council meeting to judge the elohim for corrupt rule of the nations. Verse 6 of the psalm declares that these elohim are sons of God. God says to them:

I have said, “You are gods [elohim], and sons of the Most High [beney elyon], all of you.

To a biblical writer, the Most High (elyon) was the God of Israel. The Old Testament refers to him as Most High in several places (e.g., Gen. 14:18–22; Num. 24:16; Pss. 7:17; 18:13; 47:2). The sons of God/the Most High here are clearly called elohim, as the pronoun “you” in verse 6 is a plural form in the Hebrew.

The text is not clear whether all of the elohim are under judgment or just some. The idea of elohim ruling the nations under God’s authority is a biblical concept that is described in some detail in *The Unseen Realm*. For now, it’s sufficient that you see clearly that the sons of God are divine beings under the authority of the God of Israel.

The first verse has God presiding over an assembly of gods. Doesn’t that sound like a pantheon—something we associate with polytheism and mythology?

For that reason, many English translations obscure the Hebrew in this verse. For example, the NASB translates: “God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers.” There’s no need to camouflage what the Hebrew text says. People shouldn’t be protected from the Bible. The biblical writers weren’t polytheists. But since Psalm 82 generates questions and controversy, we need to spend some time on what it teaches and what it doesn’t teach, along with other passages that inform us about the divine council.

Many Christians who object to the plain meaning of the Hebrew text of Psalm 82 assert that this psalm is actually describing God the Father speaking to the other members of the Trinity. This view results in heresy.

I’m confident you can see why—the psalm has God judging the other elohim for corruption (vv. 2–4). The corrupt elohim are sentenced to die like humans (v. 7).

These observations alone should make any Christian who cares about the doctrine of God abandon this idea. It has other flaws. The end of the psalm makes it evident that the elohim being chastised were given some sort of authority over the nations of the earth, a task at which they failed. This doesn't fit the Trinity.

Other Christians who see the problems with this first idea try to argue that the sons of God are human beings – Jews to be specific. Some Jewish readers (who obviously would not be Trinitarian) also favor this view.

This “human view” is as flawed as the Trinitarian view. At no point in the Old Testament does Scripture teach that Jews or Jewish leaders were put in authority over the other nations. The opposite is true – they were to be separate from other nations. The covenant with Abraham presupposed this separation: if Israel was wholly devoted to Yahweh, other nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). Humans are also not by nature disembodied. The word elohim is a “place of residence” term. Our home is the world of embodiment; elohim by nature inhabit the spiritual world.

Divine beings are not human. The real problem with the human view is that it cannot be reconciled with other references in the Hebrew Old Testament that refer to a divine council of elohim. Psalm 89:5-7 explicitly contradicts the notion of a divine council in which the elohim are humans.

And so the heavens will praise your wonderful deed, O Yahweh,
even your faithfulness, in the assembly of the holy ones.

For who in the sky is equal to Yahweh?

Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God,
a God feared greatly in the council of the holy ones,
and awesome above all surrounding him?

God's divine council is an assembly in the heavens, not on earth. The language is unmistakable. This is precisely what we'd expect if we understand the elohim to be divine beings. It is utter nonsense if we think of them as humans. There is no reference in Scripture to a council of human beings serving Yahweh in the skies (Jews or otherwise).

What Psalms 82 and 89 describe is completely consistent with what we see in Job 38:7 – a group of heavenly sons of God. It also accords perfectly with other references to the sons of God as plural elohim:

The sons of God came to present themselves before Yahweh. (Job 1:6; 2:1)

Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name (Psalm 29:1-2).

Do these references describe a group of Jewish leaders, among whom (in the passage from Job) Yahweh's great adversary appears, leading to Job's suffering? The conclusion is obvious.

Many scholars believe that Psalm 82 and other passages demonstrate that the religion of ancient Israel began as a polytheistic system and then evolved into monotheism. I reject that idea, along with any other explanations that seek to hide the plain reading of the text. In all such cases, the thinking is misguided. The problem is rooted in a mistaken notion of what exactly the word *elohim* means.

Since *elohim* is so often translated as "God," we look at the Hebrew word the same way we look at capitalized G-o-d. When we see the word "God," we instinctively think of a divine being with a unique set of attributes – omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty, and so on. But this is not how a biblical writer thought about the term. Biblical authors did not assign a specific set of attributes to the word *elohim*. That is evident when we observe how they used the word.

The biblical writers refer to a half-dozen different entities with the word *elohim*. By any religious accounting, the attributes of those entities are not equal.

Yahweh, the God of Israel (thousands of times – e.g., Gen. 2:4-5; Deut. 4:35)

The members of Yahweh's council (Psa. 82:1, 6)

Gods and goddesses of other nations (Judg. 11:24; 1 Kgs. 11:33)

Demons (Hebrew: *shedim* – Deut. 32:17)

The deceased Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13)

Angels or the Angel of Yahweh (Gen. 35:7)

Elohim does not imply polytheism

The importance of this list can be summarized with one question: Would any Israelite, especially a biblical writer, really believe that the deceased human dead and demons are on the same level as Yahweh? No.

The usage of the term *elohim* by biblical writers tells us very clearly that the term is not about a set of attributes. Even though when we see “G-o-d” we think of a unique set of attributes, when a biblical writer wrote *elohim*, he wasn’t thinking that way. If he were, he’d never have used the term *elohim* to describe anything but Yahweh.

Consequently, there is no warrant for concluding that plural *elohim* produces a pantheon of interchangeable deities. There is no basis for concluding that the biblical writers would have viewed Yahweh as no better than another *elohim*. A biblical writer would not have presumed that Yahweh could be defeated on any given day by another *elohim*, or that another *elohim* (why not any of them?) had the same set of attributes. That is polytheistic thinking. It is not the biblical picture.

We can be confident that Yahweh stands above the *elohim* by once again observing what the biblical writers say about him – and never say about another *elohim*. The biblical writers speak of Yahweh in ways that telegraph their belief in his uniqueness and incomparability:

“Who is like you among the gods [*elim*], Yahweh?” (Exod. 15:11)

““What god [*el*] is there in the heaven or on the earth who can do according to your works and according to your mighty deeds?” (Deut. 3:24)

“O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no god [*elohim*] like you in the heavens above or on the earth beneath” (1 Kgs. 8:23).

“For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth. You are highly exalted above all gods [*elohim*]” (Psalm 97:9).

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh. Yahweh is:

All-powerful (Jer. 32:17, 27; Pss. 72:18; 115:3)

Sovereign king over the other *elohim* (Psa. 95:3; Dan. 4:35; 1 Kgs. 22:19)

Creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa. 148:1–5; Neh. 9:6; cf. Job 38:7; Deut. 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas. 1:17)

The lone *elohim* who deserves worship from the other *elohim* (Psa. 29:1).

In fact, Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique – there is only one Yahweh (“You alone are Yahweh”).

The biblical use of *elohim* is not hard to understand once we know that it isn’t about attributes. What all the figures on the list have in common is that they are inhabitants of the spiritual world. In that realm there is hierarchy. For example, Yahweh possesses superior attributes with respect to all *elohim*. But God’s attributes aren’t what makes him an *elohim*, since inferior beings are members of that same group. The Old Testament writers understood that

Yahweh was an elohim – but no other elohim was Yahweh. He was species-unique among all residents of the spiritual world.

This is not to say that an elohim could not interact with the human world. The Bible makes it clear that divine beings can (and did) assume physical human form, and even corporeal flesh, for interaction with people, but that is not their normal estate. Spiritual beings are “spirits” (1 Kgs. 22:19–22; John 4:24; Heb. 1:14; Rev. 1:4). In like manner, humans can be transported to the divine realm (e.g., Isa. 6), but that is not our normal plane of existence. As I explained earlier, the word elohim is a “place of residence” term. It has nothing to do with a specific set of attributes. Those who want to avoid the clarity of Psalm 82 argue that the gods are only idols. As such, they aren’t real. This argument is flatly contradicted by Scripture. It’s also illogical and shows a misunderstanding of the rationale of idolatry. With respect to Scripture, one need look no further than Deuteronomy 32:17: “They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons [shedim], not God [eloah], to gods [elohim] whom they had not known.”

The verse explicitly calls the elohim that the Israelites perversely worshiped demons (shedim). This rarely used term (Deut. 32:17; Psa. 106:37) comes from the Akkadian shedu. In the ancient Near East, the term shedu was neutral; it could speak of a good or malevolent spirit being. These Akkadian figures were often cast as guardians or protective entities, though the term was also used to describe the life force of a person. In the context of Deuteronomy 32:17, shedim were elohim – spirit beings guarding foreign territory – who must not be worshiped. Israel was supposed to worship her own God (here, eloah; cf. Deut. 29:25). One cannot deny the reality of the elohim/shedim in Deuteronomy 32:17 without denying the reality of demons. Scholars disagree over what kind of entity the shedim were. But whatever the correct understanding of shedim might be, they are not pieces of wood or stone.

Scholars of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians know that in the apostle’s warning to not fellowship with demons (1 Cor. 10:20), Paul’s comments follow the history of the Israelites described in Deuteronomy 32. He warns believers against fellowship with demons on the basis of Israel’s failure in worshiping other gods. Paul uses the word daimonion, one of the words used frequently in the New Testament for evil spiritual beings, to translate shedim in Deuteronomy 32:17. Paul knew his Hebrew Bible and didn’t deny the reality of the shedim, who are elohim.