

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 [Psa 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 ([Psa 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.

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