

## Divine Council 101: Lesson 2: The *elohim* of Psalm 82 – gods or men?

Psalm 82 is considered by Old Testament / Hebrew Bible scholars as a “parade example” of the divine council because of the plurality of the אֱלֹהִים in 82:1, 6:

- 1 God (אֱלֹהִים - *elohim*) stands in the divine assembly (בְּעֵדֻת־אֵל); He judges among the gods (אֱלֹהִים - *elohim*).
- 2 How long will you judge (תִּשְׁפֹּט) unjustly, and accept (תִּשָּׂא) the persons of the wicked? Selah.
- 3 Defend (שִׁפְט) the poor and fatherless: do justice (הַצְדִּיק) to the afflicted and needy.
- 4 Deliver (פְּלֹט) the poor and needy: rid [them] (הַצִּיל) out of the hand of the wicked.
- 5 They (*the elohim*) know not (לֹא יָדְעוּ), neither will they (*the elohim*) understand (וְלֹא יִבִּינּוּ); they (*the elohim*) walk on (יִתְהַלְּכוּ) in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course.
- 6 I have said, you [are] gods (אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם - *elohim*); and all of you [are] the sons of the most High (וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן כְּלֶכֶם - *bene 'elyon*).
- 7 But you shall die (תָּמוּתוּן) like Adam,<sup>1</sup> and fall (תִּפְלוּ) like one of the Shining Ones.<sup>2</sup>
- 8 Arise, O God, judge the earth: for you shall inherit all nations.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew here is כְּאָדָם, and is usually translated "like men." Aside from the connection with the verb mentioned above in the ensuing discussion, the translation choice here is based on the work of Mullen (239-240) and Hugh Rowland Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of its reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996): 158-164. Page's is the most thorough and up to date work comparing the passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of a cosmic rebellion with those of Ugarit. The translation choice "Adam" reflects the connection that exists between (1) presence of the "Shining One" (Lucifer) in Isaiah 14:12-15 in the holy Mount - the Mount of the Assembly (the place where the council met) and the designation of Eden, the garden of God, as the Mount of Assembly in Ezekiel 28; and (2) the reference to a certain "Shining One" in Psalm 82:7 (see note below).

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew here is כְּאַחַד הַשָּׁרִים, which is usually translated "like one of the princes," under the assumption that the noun is related to the Akkadian *šarru*, meaning "ruler, prince" (*BDB*, 978a). This is the correct Akkadian cognate, but contrary to the information in *BDB* (977b), which asserts that the related verbal root *šaruru* most likely does not mean "rise in splendor" (in reference to the sun, and so "shine"), subsequent scholarship has demonstrated otherwise. While there may be some question that the verbal form *šaruru* may not be used with "shine" as its meaning, the adjective form *šarūru* certainly does mean "shining," as evidenced by its use to describe the planet Venus in astronomical texts (Page: 97, note 134). Psalm 82:7 would therefore contain a substantive use of the cognate adjective. See Mullen, *The Divine Council*, 239-240. It should be pointed out that this argument from the cognates is not necessary for further evidence that the personages in Psalm 82 are divine beings, since שָׂר in its meaning of "prince" is used in Daniel to identify divine beings - those אֱלֹהִים who still rule the nations, and Michael, guardian of God's portion, Israel (Dan. 10:13, 20-21; 12:1; cp. Deut. 4:19; 32:8-9).

This psalm has generated much scholarly controversy.<sup>3</sup> As many scholars who have tackled its contents have noted, the main issue of the psalm is determining what אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) means in verses 1b and 6a. It makes absolutely no sense for God – the first אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in 82:1 – to be standing in the council of God / אֱלֹהִים *in the midst* of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) taken as another singular. How can God stand *in the midst* of God, or Himself? The answer cannot be the Trinity, for it would require us to place the essence of the Father *in the midst of the essence* of the Son and Spirit – yet the essence of God is *inseparable*. It would seem obvious that the second אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*; v. 1b) must be pluralized, but since this allegedly smacks of polytheism, many commentators have resisted the translation “gods” and chosen to translate the second *elohim* as human beings (judges, rulers, mighty warriors).

As the great semitics scholar Cyrus Gordon pointed out over sixty years ago, translating אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) as “rulers” or “judges” is an option that lacks validity, and is an example of theologically “protecting” God.<sup>4</sup> Since Gordon adequately chronicles the examples where אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) is only speculatively translated as “rulers” or “judges,”<sup>5</sup> and demonstrates in each example that such a translation choice is unnecessary, I’ll focus on features of the psalm that compel the conclusion that אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in v. 1b and 6a should be translated “gods” or, better, “divine beings.”<sup>6</sup> These features can be categorized as (1) external features; (2) internal features; (3) biblical / textual absurdities produced by the “human” view.

## External Features

Several external considerations point to verses 1b and 6a as describing the divine council and its “divine beings.”

First, the fact that the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in 6a are called עֲלִיּוֹן בְּנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן (*benê ‘elyōn*) is a strong argument to their divine nature, for עֲלִיּוֹן (*‘elyōn*)

<sup>3</sup> See Julian Morgenstern, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* XIV (1939): 29-98; W.S. Prinsloo, “Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?” *Biblica* 76:2 (1995): 219-228; and Lowell Handy, “Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 51-66.

<sup>4</sup> Cyrus Gordon, “אֱלֹהִים in its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* LIV (1935): 139-144.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see *The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, ed. Jay P. Green (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979): 43a.

<sup>6</sup> While this author agrees with Gordon that אֱלֹהִים need not (and should not) be translated “judges” or “rulers” in Psalm 82 and his other examples, he disagrees with Gordon’s conclusion that in at least two of these instances (Exodus 21:6 and 22:6-7) one should understand the term as referring to household gods/idols. Gordon cites certain oath-taking examples in the Nuzi dialect of Akkadian in favor of his decision, but admits that other Akkadian parallels (e.g. Hammurabi’s Code) has a *singular* deity in view. This author would prefer to translate אֱלֹהִים in these texts (and others) as simply “God” or “gods,” and not “household gods/idols” or “judges.” That such an effort has been exerted to identify these beings as humans ought also to inform the reader that אֱלֹהִים in these texts (and especially Psalm 82) does *not* refer to mere angels (i.e., מַלְאָכִים). The comparative semitic data make it clear that the members of the council had a higher status than these “messenger” beings.

is a completely transparent title for deity, both in Hebrew and Ugaritic. The word refers only to God / El in the Bible and Ugaritic religious texts.<sup>7</sup> The point here is that the phrase "sons of Elyon" in Canaanite (Ugaritic) material always refers to gods / divine beings. Hence the identical phrasing in biblical Hebrew, whose closest "linguistic cousin" is Ugaritic, would require a comparative understanding. Anyone in ancient Palestine who heard or read the phrase "sons of the Most High" would know instantly that divine beings was the referent.

Second, the terms and themes in this psalm are also present in Ugaritic literature. Elyōn, *princes / shining ones*, and *gods* are all present in the Ugaritic poem "the Gracious Gods," and it is quite telling that the notion in Psalm 82:7 of the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) "falling" like "one of the Shining Ones" is found "in a specific episode of Canaanite mythology, in which the fall of one of the "sons of the princes" of the heavenly council was depicted.

Third, the fact that the psalm speaks of rendering justice to the poor and needy does not argue for human judges, since the divine council terminology from Sumer, Akkad, and Ugarit "referred originally to the political organ of a primitive democracy, a phenomenon which can be discerned *in the pantheons* of various non-Israelite cultures."<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, verses such as Isaiah 24:21 ("In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below") clearly *distinguish* between the divine beings of Yahweh's host and earthly rulers. What this means is that the Hebrew Bible had a definite way of *distinguishing* the divine beings (the powers – plural – in heaven) from humans. It makes little sense to make Psalm 82 unclear if such a *contrast* between gods and humans were the goal. Why confuse people by using *elohim* if you wanted to refer to humans?

## Internal Features

Internal features of Psalm 82 place the argument that אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in v. 1b and 6a are divine beings and not human judges beyond dispute. Two recent enlightening articles on the text of Psalm 82 have produced a number of structural proofs for the

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 14:18ff. (God *Most High*). On the use of אֱלֹהִים at Ugarit as either an epithet of El or a "double name of a single god," see Cross, *CMHE*, p. 51. The word's use in Genesis 14:18-22, especially along with the phrase "Creator of heaven and earth" (קִנְיָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ ; 14:22) presents a firm linguistic appearance in the Hebrew text of one of Canaanite El's titles (qanu 'ars). See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>8</sup> Matitiah Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," *Hebrew Union College Annual* XL-XLI (1969-1970): 127; Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*: 158-164. In all these ancient religions, as well as the theology of the Hebrew Bible, the gods / God and their/ his council were *supposed* to render right judgment for the oppressed and the poor (see Mullen, *The Divine Council*, pp. 231ff.; see esp. pp. 233-238). The earth itself was founded on justice (Isa. 28:16ff.) and each member of the council had his own earthly responsibilities (Deut. 4:19 and 32:8-9, reading with LXX and Qumran). As Cyrus Gordon also notes, "The duty of rulers (gods and kings alike) is to protect the weak from the strong" (Cyrus Gordon, "History of Religion in Psalm 82," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies : Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor*, ed. Gary A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978): 129-131 (see p. 130). More will be said in regard to Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8,9 momentarily.

translation choice for which this paper argues.<sup>9</sup> Although this is technical, readers who know a bit of Hebrew – or have a good grasp of grammatical principles – can benefit from the discussion. Nevertheless, to avoid being overly technical (and boring), I'll skip some of the evidence and highlight some of the more striking features:

1. Psalm 82:1 has a chiasmic ("X") structure that compels the understanding that the second אֱלֹהִים refers to divine, not human, beings. Here's the first line from Psalm 82:1 (recall Hebrew is read right to left)

יִשְׁפֹּט	בְּקִרְבֹּת אֱלֹהִים	בְּעֵדֹת־אֵל	אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב
a2	b2	b	a
he judges	in the midst of the gods	in the divine council	God stands

Here's the X structure of the Hebrew poetic parallelism. It shows that, in the mind of the Hebrew poet, element "b" = element "b2". Consequently, if *elohim* refers to humans, the psalmist would be saying humans are part of the divine council:

in the divine council	God stands
בְּעֵדֹת־אֵל	אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב
<b>b</b>	<b>a</b>

X

he judges	in the midst of the gods
יִשְׁפֹּט	בְּקִרְבֹּת אֱלֹהִים
<b>a2</b>	<b>b2</b>

2. The ineptitude of the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in verse 5 has resulted in “the foundations of earth being out of course,” which would hardly be the result of *human* failure. In fact, the notion that the “foundations of the earth” (same phraseology) is linked to the decrees of the actions of the deity who leads the divine council in Mesopotamia and Ugarit.<sup>10</sup>
3. The grammatical particle אֲכֵן (‘akēn) in verse 7 indicates “a strong antithetical relationship with v. 6.”<sup>11</sup> The presence of אָמַרְתִּי (“I said”) introducing the clause prior to אֲכֵן (‘akēn) has been demonstrated to require a translation of roughly “**I had thought . . . but . . .**”<sup>12</sup> The contrast is, of course, between the speaker of verse 6, Yahweh (who in either view is the

<sup>9</sup> Prinsloo, 222ff.; Handy, “Sounds, Words, and Meanings in Psalm 82,” 51-66. See also Mullen, *The Divine Council*, pp. 226ff.

<sup>10</sup> Mullen, *The Divine Council*, p. 233. Likewise, the judgment of this failure the call for Yahweh to “take over” in verse 8 is not meant to contrast Yahweh’s superior ability to render justice as opposed to humans; this would be obvious and strips the irony from the text. The effectual Yahweh is not being compared to ineffectual humans, but rather to the ineffectual divine beings – whom he put in charge of the nations of the earth (Deut. 4:19; see below) - but who now have been shown to have deliberately plunged the earth into chaos.

<sup>11</sup> Prinsloo, 226.

<sup>12</sup> Morgenstern, 33.

only One who has the authority to render the death sentence for these אֱלֹהִים - *elohim*), and the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of verse 6a – the word being in parallel to בְּנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן (*benê ‘elyōn*)! Consequently, interpreting the phrase “you shall die like Adam” to be referring to *human* judges would contradict the contrasts required by the grammar. It would also require ignoring the parallel here with the judgment on Adam and Eve. The point is not that the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) were put to death at the moment Yahweh judged them, but that they *must die as a result of their actions* (i.e., they would become mortal).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is patently illogical. As Smick noted, “if they are going to die *like* mortals, they are not mortals.”<sup>14</sup> The *immortality* of those suffering this judgment is clearly presupposed.<sup>15</sup>

4. By virtue of the fact that the "Shining One" in 82:7 is further identified in Isaiah 14:12-15, which is parallel to Ezekiel 28:12-17, in that both passages use stories of the *rebellion of a heavenly being* to portray the fate of an earthly individual, the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) here are clearly identified as non-human. The point of the verse is that the gods will be stripped of immortality and will be cast from their high estate as that Being (Lucifer) who was punished in the same manner earlier had.

## Logical Considerations – Avoiding Textual Absurdities Created by the "human" view of *elohim*

The argument of this brief section is simple: If the second *elohim* of Psalm 82:1 refers to humans – for the specific goal of DENYING there are other *elohim* in the Israelite pantheon / council, then what happens when we substitute "humans" as a translation in other verses where *elohim* (or *elim*, the other plural for "gods") occurs in the plural? The answer is textual and theological absurdity. For example:

<sup>13</sup> Morgenstern, 73-74. This does not rule out the possibility, as some argue, that Adam and Eve possessed contingent immortality before the Fall. In that case, their punishment would involve removing that contingency (namely the tree of life from which they ate) which maintained their immortality. The effect would be the same – they were now fully mortal, and could not avoid death.

<sup>14</sup> Elmer Smick, “Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982): 95.

<sup>15</sup> It does no good to suggest that the אֱלֹהִים in question are humans who thought themselves to be divine, for the text does not say this, and, more importantly, because it would put such words in the mouth of the Yahweh (the verb is 1<sup>st</sup> singular, not 2<sup>nd</sup> plural). Lastly, to object that it is impossible to conceive of gods dying like men in an attempt to argue for human beings as the אֱלֹהִים is to actually sound polytheistic in orientation, for the objection would be based on the *assumption* that the plural אֱלֹהִים have the same qualitative essence (noncontingent immortality) as Yahweh. The point here is that if more than one being possessed noncontingent immortality, the result would be true polytheism. As the reader will momentarily note, this paper argues for a distinction between Deity (God) and divinity (god-likeness) as a solution for reconciling the plural אֱלֹהִים and Israelite monotheism.

## **Psalm 8:4-5**

What is man, that you (GOD) art mindful of him? and the son of man, that you visit him? 5 For you (GOD) have made him (humanity) a little lower than the **elohim** (אֱלֹהִים), and have crowned him with glory and honor.

**Absurdity # 1** - God made humanity a little lower than humans? Huh?

## **Psalm 86:8**

Among the **elohim** (אֱלֹהִים) [there is] none like unto you, O Lord; neither [are there any works] like unto thy works.

**Absurdity # 2** – Among humans there is none like Yahweh, the Lord – now there's a revelation. Again, why muddy the waters and use **elohim** if the comparison was to humans.

## **Exodus 15:11**

Who [is] like unto you, O Lord, among the **elim / gods** (אֱלֹהִים)? who [is] like you, glorious in holiness, fearful [in] praises, doing wonders?

**Absurdity # 3** – Can you see Moses crying out and saying this after crossing the Red Sea? That Yahweh is greater than other men? The whole point is that Yahweh had defeated the gods of Egypt and was incomparable.

## **Psalm 89:6 (it's verse 7 in Hebrew)**

For who in the heavens can be compared to the Lord? [who] among the sons of the **elim / gods** (אֱלֹהִים) can be likened to the Lord? 7 God is greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones (בְּסוּדֵי־קְדוֹשִׁים ; b<sup>e</sup>sōd q<sup>e</sup>dōshīm), and to be revered by all [them that are] around him.

**Absurdity # 4** – So, Yahweh cannot be compared to the humans in heaven? He's superior to humans in heaven? No kidding. The context is clearly beings in the heavens (those "around God" – that place where the gods were thought to live). Again, why muddy the waters and use **elim** if the comparison was to humans. The waters aren't muddied here – the scene is in heaven, and God is being shown superior to the other gods (many of whom fell and had to be judged as in Psalm 82).