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What is / are (an) Elohim?

0. Introduction

We've all no doubt heard the Italian proverb ("traduttore, traditore"): "*translator, traitor*"—the idea being that every translator is a traitor. I'm not that cynical, since I'm familiar with the difficulty of the translation enterprise, but I have to admit that there are times when translators really do betray the text. This sort of fudging is evident in passages that involve the word אֱלֹהִים when grammar and context clearly indicate the word is plural—especially when the plural אֱלֹהִים are not foreign deities. The inclination to obscure what's really in the text in these instances is understandable. After all, when Psalm 82 describes the God of Israel as presiding over other plural אֱלֹהִים, that sounds like polytheism. But that admission in turn suggests that the text is being translated so that it conforms to our theological expectations or needs. Surely that strategy can't be recommended. Yet that is precisely what many translators and scholars do in the name of fidelity to God. I would suggest this is dishonest and hypocritical.

In this paper I want to suggest that we need not fear the biblical text, and need not protect people from the biblical text. There is a simple way to resolve the problem of an inspired Old Testament that affirms that there are many real אֱלֹהִים (good or evil) in addition to Yahweh. Though simple, the solution requires us to think like a Semite, like an Israelite, and not as the product of the Reformation or modern evangelicalism. Biblical theology does not begin with us, Calvin, Luther, Aquinas, or Augustine. It

begins with the text as it stands, understood within the historical, cultural, and religious context that produced it.

1. Illustration of the Problem

There are a number of references to plural gods in the Hebrew Bible that, despite the clarity of the text, have troubled translators.

| אלהים | אלים |
|--|--|
| Deut 32:17; Ps 82:1; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:7, 9; 136.2; 138:1 | Exod 15:11; Ps 89:5-7 [Heb: vv. 6-8]; 58:11 ¹ ; Ps 29:1 |

By way of example, the NASB renders the second אלהים in Psalm 82:1 as “rulers.” Other translations are more faithful, opting for “gods” or “divine beings,” but study Bibles of these versions then obscure the text when scholars offer alternative renderings like “rulers” or “judges.” Other translations are simply inconsistent. For example, while rendering the second אלהים “gods” in Psa 82:1, the NIV nevertheless has “mighty ones” for *bēnê ’ēlīm* of Psalm 29:1. NASB (“sons of the mighty”) and NKJV (“mighty ones”) follow suit.

There are perhaps no more gratuitous and perplexing translation choices as those one will find for Deut 32:17. Regarding Deut 32:17, English translations reflect disagreement over primarily two issues: whether to render אֱלֹהִים as singular or plural

¹ There is a text-critical issue with this instance. For text-critical reasons, as well as reasons of literary parallelism, MT consonantal אֱלֹם should be vocalized אֱלֹם or emended to אֱלִים. See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 2002) 82; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II:51-100* (AB 16; New York: Doubleday, 1968) 57; M. Heiser, “Should אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlohîm*) with Plural Predication Be Translated ‘Gods’?” *Bible Translator* 61:3 (July 2010): 135-136.

and how to translate the verbless clause in which it appears (לֹא אֱלֹהִים). English translations illustrate the divergence.

ESV - “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known . . .”

RSV - “They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known . . .”

CEV – “You offered sacrifices to demons, those useless gods that never helped you, new gods that your ancestors never worshiped.”

The illustrations show that translations which opt for translating אֱלֹהִים as plural produce a reading that denies that the שֵׁדִים (“demons”) are gods. Such translations, however, are forced to juxtapose this denial with the next clause, אֱלֹהִים לֹא יָדְעוּם (“gods which they did not know”) which appears to clearly contradict that denial. How can the demons be gods and not gods in the same verse? Translations which take אֱלֹהִים as singular do not suffer this tension. There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where אֱלֹהִים is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun, and so a plural translation of that term here is motivated only by theology.²

2. Solutions that are No Solutions

2.1. The Reality of the אֱלֹהִים

² For a semantic and syntactical analysis of how Deut 32:17 should be translated, see M. Heiser. “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” Bible Translator 59:3 (July 2008): 137-145. The word אֱלֹהִים is a defective spelling of the lemma אֱלֹהִים. A computer search of the Hebrew Bible (BHS) reveals that the lemma אֱלֹהִים occurs 58 times. The only place where such an option might appear to be workable is 2 Kgs 17:31, where the text informs us that “the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (אֱלֹהִים סַפְרַיִם).” The pointing here suggests that the lemma is not אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהִים in a misspelled or archaic plural construct form. That the Qere reading for this form is אֱלֹהִים argues forcefully that the lemma is not אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהִים.

Scholars have noted for some time that Deuteronomy contains several passages that not only assume the existence of other gods, but also have those gods subservient to the will of the God of Israel. Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and its explicit parallel, Deut 4:19-20, have YHWH placing the Gentile nations under the authority of lesser divine beings:

Deut 32:8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance (lemma: נַחֲלָה), when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God [בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים].³ 9 But the LORD's portion (חֵלֶק) is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage (חֵבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ).

Deut 4:19 Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, whom the LORD your God has allotted (חֵלֶק) to all the peoples under the whole heaven. 20 But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance (נַחֲלָה), as you are this day.

These “sons of God” are not idols or mere astronomical objects; they were believed to be real spiritual entities. This is readily discerned by reading through Deuteronomy with an eye to other gods.

In Deut 17:3 the host of heaven are referred to as “other gods” (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים), a phrase used frequently in Deuteronomy, and are worshipped by Israelites in defiance of Deut 4:19-20. If one traces אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים through Deuteronomy, one discovers Deut 29:25-26, a passage that tells us clearly that Israel “went and served other gods (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים) with language clearly echoed in Deut 32:8-9 and Deut 32:17. The

³ Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut 32:8, which reads בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“sons of Israel”). See for example, P. W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut 32) from Qumran,” *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; idem, “Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text,” *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^h, 4QDt^j, 4QDt^k, 4QDt^l,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-79; Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518.

Deuteronomy 29 passage explicitly tells us that Israel worshipped “gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.” The reality of these אֱלֹהִים entities must be affirmed since they are called demons. Anyone who respects the theological content of the text must affirm that demons are real entities. If one embraces the reality of demons, then it makes little sense to retreat to the idea that when the demons are called gods in Deut 32:17 the writer is thinking of idols or mere objects in the sky. That the host of heaven were spirit entities is also affirmed elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kgs 22:19-23; Job 38:7-8).

What we have before us is a biblical writer who is thinking of real entities, entities he calls both demons (שְׂדִים) and gods (אֱלֹהִים). And it isn't honest to draw theological comfort in saying “well, all those gods are really demons,” since the corollary must also be true—“all those demons are gods (אֱלֹהִים).” For many, the creeping feeling of polytheism is still there, but we will dispense with that in a moment.

2.2. Misunderstanding The Logic of Idolatry

Lastly, these approaches I've just criticized also fundamentally misunderstand the logic of idolatry. For the ancient polytheist and the Israelite, what we see in Deuteronomy and elsewhere would not constitute a conundrum. While both the entity and the cult object might be called a god, it cannot be presumed that ancient people considered a humanly fabricated statue or fetish object to be identical with the god in whose likeness it was fashioned. As one scholar of ancient cult objects notes:

When a non-physical being manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance . . . In order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth. . . . This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the

potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its “bodies,” in all locations, all at one time.⁴

The Old Testament parodies and denunciations of the gods and idolatry are to be viewed the same way.⁵ The ancient Israelite was not so naive to think that Baal did not exist if his statue had not yet been made or if it was destroyed. Passages in the prophets drive home the fact that idols made by human hands are not actually gods—but that is not to deny that other gods were real. The foreign gods of the nations had their authority dispensed to them by YHWH. They weren’t statues; they were more than statues—but they were under the sovereign constraints of Yahweh. Idols were merely objects designed to focus attention and worship of the otherworldly deity the idolater sought to manipulate or appease. With this perspective, the biblical prohibition against making any likeness of YHWH becomes even more pronounced. YHWH could not be brought to earth, cajoled, and tamed.

3. What’s in Your Bible? What Gets Referred to as אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible?

⁴ Gay Robins, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ASOR Book Series 10; ed. Neal H. Walls; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1-2.

⁵ For a discussion of the Old Testament’s “denial phrases” (e.g., “there is none besides me”; “there is none like me”) that allegedly disallow the existence of other gods in biblical theology, see Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *BBR* 18:1 (2008): 1-30.

It isn't only demons who are called אלהים in the Hebrew Bible. Here is a list of the biblical אלהים:

- A. Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 2000 times)
- B. The אלהים of Yahweh's heavenly council, both loyal and disloyal (Psa 82; Psa 89; cf. Deut 32:8-9, 43; Psa 58:11)
- C. The gods of foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33)
- D. Demons (Deut 32:17)
- E. Spirits of the human dead (1 Sam 28:13)
- F. Angels (Gen 35:7 – the context of the plural predicator with אלהים subject)

Yahweh as אלהים and the term's obvious use of foreign gods require no elaboration. Since we have already looked at Deut 32:17, we'll move on to the others.

Briefly, the אלהים of Yahweh's council (Psa 82) are divine beings, not human rulers. This is most obvious from the parallel passage in Psalm 89:5-8. In Psalm 82:1 the plural אלהים are called "sons of the Most High" in verse 6. Obviously, this means they are "sons of the God of Israel" since in biblical theology, Yahweh is Most High (Psa 83:18). In Psalm 89, Yahweh's sons are called *bēnê 'ēlîm*. These *bēnê 'ēlîm* are quite obviously not human since their assembly or council is explicitly said to be in the clouds / heavens (בשחק) not on earth. The content of Psalm 82 also easily demonstrates these are divine beings, not humans, since the plural אלהים of Psalm 82 are being judged for their corrupt administration of the nations. The Hebrew Bible never asserts that human rulers, Jew or Gentile, are in charge of the nations. Moreover, contrary to popular and scholarly assumption, no passage in the Hebrew Bible calls the human

elders of Israel אלהים (see my other paper tomorrow afternoon). Since the council of Psalm 82 is in heaven anyway, it wouldn't matter if that were the case, but it isn't. Lastly, we cannot have an oblique reference to the Trinity in Psalm 82 since the plural אלהים are called corrupt and are stripped of their immortality. Despite the incoherence of the human rulers view in light of the data, scholars still advance it since they think they are required to do so to defend monotheism.

With respect to 1 Samuel 28:13, part of the “medium of Endor” narrative, the text tells us that, after being solicited by Saul to conjure the dead prophet Samuel, the medium exclaims, אלהים ראיתי עלי מן הארץ. The אלהים in the text could be translated singular or plural: “I saw a god / gods coming up from the earth.” Both are possible since the plural participle עלי could only reflect the plural morphology of אלהים. Saul's subsequent question helps us decide with a singular reading since he asks the medium in v. 14, “What is his (3ms suffix) appearance?” The deceased Samuel who appears to Saul is an אלהים. While this might seem strange to us, the notion that the departed dead were “gods” (אלהים) is quite in concert with ancient Canaanite thinking.

The most explicit connection between the Hebrew word for angel (מלאך) and אלהים is that between the figure of God himself and his special Angel. That connection is implied in Gen 35:7, and perhaps other angels. In that verse, אלהים is the subject of a plural verb and angelic beings are part of the context.

Genesis 35:1-7 reads in part:

God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God (לְאֱלֹ) who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” ² So Jacob said to his household . . . 3 . . . let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God (לְאֱלֹ) who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” ⁶ And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷ and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him (or, “the gods revealed themselves to him”; נִגְלוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתָיו הָאֱלֹהִים) when he fled from his brother.

The interpretive issue here is what episode in Jacob’s life is being referenced in Genesis 35. Genesis 28 is not in view, since that was not the episode in which Jacob was explicitly described as fleeing from his brother. It appears that Genesis 32 is the referent. Jacob has two divine encounters in that passage and the events are connected to his flight from Esau. The lesser-known of these two encounters occurs in Gen 32.1, where we read (ESV), “Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים) met him.” Upon seeing these beings, Jacob’s response was the exclamation, “This is the camp of אֱלֹהִים” (32:1). The more familiar episode of Genesis 32 (vv. 22-32) has Jacob wrestling with “a man” (Gen 32.24) whom Jacob refers to with the word (אֱלֹהִים; v. 32). The divine nature of the man is reiterated in Hos 12.3-4 (Hebrew, 4-5):

In the womb he took his brother by the heel;
and in his manhood he strove (שָׂרָה) with God (אֱלֹהִים).
Yes, he strove (וַיִּשָׂר) with an angel (מַלְאָךְ), and prevailed:
he wept, and made supplication to him;

he found him in Bethel, and there he spoke with us.

Hosea quite clearly refers to this particular מלאך as אלהים. This is consistent with the outlook of other Pentateuchal material, where a particular angel is deified and identified with YHWH. Consider Gen 48.15-16 (ESV):

15 And he blessed Joseph, and said, God (האלהים), before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God (האלהים) who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, 16 The angel (המלאך) who has redeemed me from all evil, bless (יברך) the boys;⁶ and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

For our purposes, the plural verb form of Gen 35:7 may be due to the fact that both Yahweh and the Angel who is the visible Yahweh appeared to Jacob as he fled. However, the other angels of God may also be included in the plural verb form. At any rate, the question is a bit misguided since מלאך is a functional term, not an ontological term. Messengers (“angels”) as אלהים would be quite in concert with Canaanite culture and religion, and makes good sense in light of what the term אלהים really means. It is to that question—and the solution to our problem—that we now turn.

4. What is / are (an) ELOHIM?

The fact that five different entities are referenced as אלהים should immediately and unambiguously tell us that the word ought *not* be identified with one particular set of attributes. This is our fundamental mistake. We are accustomed to defining the

⁶ Note that the predicator for this compound subject is *singular*), making an identification of the God of Israel and the Angel unmistakable.

letters g-o-d with the God of Israel, and so the idea that other gods are indeed real—even if that is what the biblical text says—has been something to escape or obscure. But we ought to know intuitively that the biblical writers would not equate Yahweh in an ontological sense or in a qualitative sense with demons, angels, the human disembodied dead—or the gods of the nations or Yahweh’s own council. אלהים as a term does not refer to a set of attributes or ontology. So what does it mean?

Very simply, all the things called אלהים in the Hebrew Bible have one thing in common: they all inhabit the non-human realm. That is, they are by nature not part of the world of humankind, a world of embodiment by nature. אלהים is what I call a “place of residence” term. It identifies the proper domain of the entity described by it. It labels the entity in terms of its residence, if you will. Yahweh, the lesser gods, angels, demons, and the disembodied dead are all rightful inhabitants of the spiritual world. They may be able to cross over to our world, as Scripture tells us, and certain humans may be transported to their realm (prophets; Enoch), but their proper domain and our proper domain are two separate places. Within the spiritual world there is ontological differentiation, rank, and power: Yahweh is an אלהים, but no other אלהים is Yahweh. That was what an orthodox Israelite believed about Yahweh. He was not one among equals; he was species unique. Our modern term (17th century) “monotheism” is deficient for describing this, since it carries the baggage of identifying “g-o-d” with a single set of attributes held only by Yahweh. However, the thought behind the term—that Yahweh is utterly and eternally unique—remains completely intact. Our translations and our theology ought to make this clear. We have nothing to fear from letting the text say what it says.

