

## SHOULD אֱלֹהִים (ʿĒLŌHĪM) WITH PLURAL PREDICATION BE TRANSLATED “GODS”?

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### 1. Introduction

It is well known among students and scholars of the Hebrew Bible that the noun אֱלֹהִים occurs over 2,500 times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup> Of these occurrences, this morphologically plural noun is used nearly fifteen hundred times as the subject of a grammatically singular predicator.<sup>2</sup> This of course means that אֱלֹהִים frequently speaks of a single deity, most notably the God of Israel. The singularity of אֱלֹהִים is indicated in other ways as well. Specifically, there are the numerous instances where אֱלֹהִים is found in syntactical apposition with the divine name, *YHWH*, or where אֱלֹהִים is prefixed by the article (הַאֱלֹהִים). In fact, הַאֱלֹהִים is one of the means by which the biblical writers distinguished their God from all others. In Deut 4.35, for instance, the reader is told that יהוה הוא האֱלֹהִים אין עוד מלבדו (“*YHWH*, he is *the* God; there is none else besides him”).

There are, of course, exceptions to how אֱלֹהִים and הַאֱלֹהִים are used by the biblical writers. It is fairly common to have אֱלֹהִים used in its construct form in plurality phrases like the “gods of Egypt.” Deuteronomy’s stern warnings against worshipping אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (“other gods”) are well known. הַאֱלֹהִים is at times the word of choice in referencing foreign deities corporately. In Judg 10.14 *YHWH* tells Israel, “Go and cry out to the gods (הַאֱלֹהִים) whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress” (ESV). אֱלֹהִים and הַאֱלֹהִים, then, can both be used to speak of a group of deities.

This is all straightforward and of no surprise to those who work in the text of the Hebrew Bible. What is of greater interest is whether or not אֱלֹהִים and הַאֱלֹהִים are ever to be taken as semantically plural in contexts where foreign deities are *not* in view. In other words, are there instances where אֱלֹהִים and הַאֱלֹהִים are the subject of a plural predicator where the referent is a group of divine beings in the

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1 The exact count is 2,601 occurrences in 2,248 verses, according to *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: With Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit Morphology* (Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit; Logos Bible Software, 2006).

2 This number is rounded off and based on the results of a search in the Andersen-Forbes syntactically-tagged database of the Hebrew Bible (Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, *The Hebrew Bible: Andersen-Forbes Phrase Marker Analysis*; Logos Bible Software, 2005).

“orthodox” religion of the Israelites who produced the final form of the Hebrew Bible? Discussions of this inquiry usually converge on passages that deal with Israel’s divine council. The semantic plurality of אלהים in Ps 82.1 and Ps 86.8, and the plural אלים in Exod 15.11, are parade examples of an Israelite pantheon headed by the God of Israel.<sup>3</sup> These indications of divine plurality as a component of Israelite religion raise the question of whether more evidence for Israel’s divine council might be detected in the text by searching the Hebrew Bible for passages where אלהים or האלהים is the grammatical subject of plural predication. This investigation is the focus of this article.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. אלהים and האלהים as the subject of plural predication

Recent syntactic database development allows the scholar/translator to construct a query for אלהים and האלהים as the subject of a clause whose predicator is a third person plural finite verb.<sup>5</sup> The search yields six occurrences of this syntactical structuring: Gen 20.13; 35.7; Exod 22.8; 2 Sam 7.23; 1 Kgs 19.2; 20.10. Relaxing the constraints of the predication in the query yields other relevant results. There are four other passages where אלהים and האלהים are in grammatical relationship with a plural predicator: Gen 31.53; 1 Sam 28.13; 1 Kgs 12.28; and Ps 58.12 (English 58.11). These instances were absent from the initial query because either the predicator of the clause is a participle or the subject and predicate had a compound structure.

All of these instances of אלהים and האלהים with plural predication could be ascribed to certain categories of anomalous grammatical agreement. For example, Joüon-Muraoka notes that, on occasion, a normally singular verb form will be plural in agreement with the so-called plural of majesty.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, אלהים and האלהים as the subject of a plural predicator is statistically infrequent, but the fact that some of these examples have explicit parallels in other biblical passages where

3 Psalm 82.1, 6 read, respectively, אלהים נצב בעדת אל בקרב אלהים ישפט (“God stands in the divine assembly; in the midst of the gods he passes judgment”) and ענין כלבם ו בני ענין כלבם ו בני ענין כלבם ו בני ענין כלבם ו (“I said, ‘You are gods, even sons of the Most High, all of you’”). Psalm 86.8 reads in part: אין כדשם באלהים (“there is none like you among the gods”). Exodus 15.11 expresses the same statement via a rhetorical question: יהוה מיהוה כדשם באלים (“Who is like you among the gods, O YHWH?”). Psalm 89.7 (89.6) should also be included. The context argues for plural אלים, not אל with enclitic *mem* (cf. אלים קדשים, בסוד קדשים, in the same passage). Secondary literature includes E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1980); Julian Morgenstern, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1939), 29-126; Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 41-66; and Matitiahu Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40-41 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1969-1970), 123-37.

4 This article focuses on the specific syntactical circumstance where אלהים and האלהים are the grammatical subject of a plural predicator. It does not deal with texts like Gen 1.26 (ויאמר אלהים נעשה אדם) since אלהים in that text is not the subject of a plural predicator. Rather, אלהים is the subject of the singular ויאמר. The plural נעשה is a plural cohortative, spoken by a singular entity in context.

5 This search was performed with Andersen and Forbes, *The Hebrew Bible*.

6 Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (trans. and rev. Takamitsu Muraoka; 2 vols.; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2003; 2005), 2:553.

the predicator is singular and not plural suggests that there may be more to the phenomenon than a writer's occasional whim to violate written convention.

### 3. Analysis and commentary

Since the stated focus of this paper is whether אלהים or האלהים with a plural predicator might indicate the Israelite divine council in orthodox Yahwism, several of the passages listed above in the search results can be set aside. Specifically, 1 Kgs 19.2 and 20.10 can be excused from the discussion since both examples are statements from the mouth of Jezebel: “So may the gods do to me (כה־יעשׂון לי) (אלהים)” if she fails to have Elijah put to death. Most scholars would agree that statements and sentiments of non-Israelites are not very useful for articulating the nature of orthodox Israelite religion. First Kings 12.28 is of the same nature, since the speaker is King Jeroboam, who is cast by the biblical writers as subversive of orthodox Yahwism. In order to deter the people residing in his renegade kingdom from taking pilgrimages into the Davidic kingdom of Judah, the biblical writers have Jeroboam making two calves of gold and then declaring, as the Israelites had at Sinai, “Behold your gods (אלהיד), O Israel, who brought you (אשר העלוד) out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 32.4 ESV).

The remaining texts for our consideration bear no hint that the biblical writer wants the reader to assume that a foreigner or apostate is anywhere in view.

#### 3.1. Genesis 35.7

Genesis 35.7 is an intriguing text. The passage begins:

<sup>1</sup> God (אלהים) said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God (לאל) who appeared (הנראה) to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” <sup>2</sup> So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. <sup>3</sup> Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God (לאל) who answered (הענה) me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” (ESV)

Note the twofold use of the unambiguous singular אל with the corresponding singular participles (*niph'al*, *qal*). In Gen 35.7, however, the text shows a change in this pattern of grammatical agreement:

<sup>6</sup> And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, <sup>7</sup> and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God (האלהים) had revealed (נגלו) himself to him when he fled from his brother. (ESV)

The switch to the plural predicate with האלהים is striking. Is האלהים to be judged as semantically singular, as the ESV translator chose, or plural? There are two primary lines of support for taking האלהים as a *singular* deity, despite its grammatical agreement with a plural predicator: (1) the immediately preceding context, where it is clear one god is in view; and (2) the fact that, outside this passage, when האלהים (article present) occurs in contexts where it is clearly plural,

foreign deities are always in view.<sup>7</sup> If this instance of האלהים were judged semantically plural, it would be the lone occurrence of האלהים where Israelite deities were the referent.

Despite the general coherence of these arguments, there are also indications that Gen 35.7 might have the divine beings of the Israelite divine council in view. Articulating this possibility requires discerning what event in Jacob's life might be the retrospective focus of Gen 35.7. There are two possibilities.

First, in Gen 28.10-21, Jacob beholds what is apparently a ziggurat-type structure in a dream at Bethel (Gen 28.19). At either the top of the structure or beside him<sup>8</sup> Jacob sees *YHWH* (Gen 28.13). He also witnesses מלאכי אלהים ("angels of God") ascending and descending upon the structure. It is well known from scholarship on the divine council that the beings of the lowest tier of the cosmic hierarchy, the מלאכים, are referred to as "gods" (*ʿilm*) in Ugaritic texts. However, the Hebrew Bible never explicitly equates the term מלאכים with אלהים or בני האלהים or בני אלים. If האלהים of Gen 35.7 is taken as a semantic plural, the מלאכי אלהים could be a logical referent, thus providing evidence for an identification of מלאכים as אלהים. However, there is a significant obstacle to Gen 28.10-21 being the backdrop of Gen 35.7—the fact that Gen 35.7 clearly identifies the appearance of the God/gods in question with the time Jacob fled before Esau. That context removes Gen 28 from consideration.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to the second possibility, that Jacob's encounters in Gen 32 might be the backdrop for a statement of divine plurality. The lesser-known of these two encounters occurs in Gen 32.1, where we read, "Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God (מלאכי אלהים) met him" (RSV). Upon seeing these beings, Jacob's response was the exclamation, "This is the camp of אלהים," a statement congruous with the notion of the "cosmic mountain" so prevalent as a divine

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7 See Judg 10.14: לכו וזעקו אלהי-האלהים אשר בחרתם במה ישיעו לכם בעת צרתכם ("Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress" ESV); and Jer 11.12: והלכו ערי יהודה וישיבי ירושלם וזעקו אלהי-האלהים אשר הם מקטרים להם והושע לא-ישיעו להם בעת רעתם ("Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble" ESV). I would also include Ps 86.8, where the article is present with prefixed preposition: אין-כמוך באלהים אדני ואין כמעשיך ("There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours" ESV). First Samuel 4.8 is excluded since the words are placed in the mouth of a Gentile.

8 The ambiguity is caused by עליו in Gen 28.13.

9 In Gen 48.3-4 we read: "And Jacob said to Joseph, 'God Almighty (אל שדי) appeared (נראה) to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.''" While this statement does refer back to Jacob's dream in Gen 28 (the blessing formula is there), this linguistic touchpoint does not overcome the discrepancy created by ch. 35's chronological identification. We also are not required to identify the antecedent of Gen 35.1-7 as Gen 28 on the grounds that it was only in Gen 28 that Jacob built an altar to honor the deity he encountered. Gen 35.1-7 does not have Jacob referencing an incident when he built an altar. Rather, God commands him to build an altar when he returns to the location (35.1), Jacob states that this is his intention (35.3), and then Jacob follows through with that intention (35.7). The text here does not refer to an altar built in the past, which would require Gen 28 as the backdrop.

council motif.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Jacob considered this place to be where God lived and held council.

The more familiar episode of Gen 32 (vv. 22-32) has Jacob wrestling with “a man” (Gen 32.24). The match culminates in Jacob’s name change and injury, along with the statement in Gen 32.30, “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God (אלהים) face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’” (ESV). That the biblical writers considered this “man” to be the מלאך יהוה is suggested in Hos 12.4-5 (English 12.3-4) when the prophet comments on this incident:

In the womb he took his brother by the heel;  
and in his manhood he strove (שרה) with God (אלהים).  
Yes, he strove (וישר) with an angel (מלאך), 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 the pentateuchal material, where a particular angel is deified and identified with *YHWH*. Consider Gen 48.15-16:

<sup>15</sup> And he blessed Joseph and said, “The 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, <sup>16</sup>the angel (המלאך) who has redeemed me from all evil, bless (ברך) the boys;<sup>11</sup> 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.” (ESV)

One must either interpret Gen 48.15-16 as an identification of the God of Israel as a מלאך, or grant that a particular מלאך is here considered a deity and identified with the God of Israel. The first is incoherent in light of *YHWH*’s incomparability among all the host of heaven throughout the Hebrew Bible. Angels are cast as created beings, subservient to *YHWH*, in the Hebrew Bible; *YHWH* is considered uncreated and high sovereign. The second option is more likely for several reasons. First, the singular verb בִּרַךְ is inclusive of both entities. Had a plural verb form been used here, the writer’s attempt to distinguish the two would have been transparent. Second, the use of the article with המלאך and its parallelism to האלהים indicate a correspondence is being struck between a particular מלאך and the God of Israel. Third, the מלאך יהוה is elsewhere said to have the name of *YHWH* within him (Exod 23.20-23), a description that argues strongly for an identification of the מלאך יהוה and *YHWH*.<sup>12</sup> Scholarship on the ancient Jewish

10 See Richard J. Clifford, “The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971): 221-27; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

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

12 That *YHWH*’s “name” is in this angel takes on significance in view of the Name theology in the Hebrew Bible. See Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1985); Trygve N.

teaching of two (holy) powers in heaven has demonstrated that one of the pillars of this doctrine was the identification of *YHWH* and the מלאך יהוה.<sup>13</sup> Segal quotes several rabbinical texts that base the two powers idea on Exod 15.3, where *YHWH* is described as a “man of war.” The מלאך יהוה provided an exegetical approach for this idea, since he was *YHWH* anthropomorphized. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that the Jewish redactors who crafted the final form of the Hebrew canon may have allowed the plural predicator נגלו to stand with the *YHWH*-Angel two powers structure in mind.<sup>14</sup> The translator could therefore justify a plural translation, but readers might have a difficult time understanding why the choice was made.

### 3.2. Second Samuel 7.23

This text records a prayer of King David that in part reads:

And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God/the gods went (הלכו־אלהים) to redeem for himself (לפדות־לו) as his people, and to make for himself a name, and to perform for them great and awe-inspiring deeds in your land, (driving out) from before your people, whom you redeemed (פדיית) for yourself from Egypt, the nations and their gods.

This text appears to be a clear case for אלהים being semantically singular, despite the plural predication. The plural finite verb form with which אלהים agrees as grammatical subject is הלכו. The verb is followed by the concatenation of *lamed* + infinitive + *lamed* + 3ms suffix (לפדות־לו). The singular suffix suggests that the morphologically plural אלהים should be translated as a singular (“God”) despite the plural verb form. However, the suffix alone is not entirely persuasive enough to rule out a plural translation, since singular suffixes can refer to plural antecedents.<sup>15</sup> Toward the end of the verse the singular finite verb form פדיית provides sound evidence for אלהים as semantically singular, and the wider context of the exodus from Egypt (cf. Exod 3.6 above) would seem to make that conclusion irresistible. However, it is at precisely this wider contextual point that our attention is turned to possible plurality.

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D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1982); Helmer Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1947).

13 The major work on this subject is Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977). See also Daniel Boyarin, “Two Powers in Heaven; Or, The Making of a Heresy;” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 331-70.

14 I wish to thank Dr. Ehud ben Zvi for suggesting this possibility to me. Genesis 35.7 may therefore plausibly be translated, “and there he [Jacob] built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there the gods had been revealed to him when he fled from his brother.” However, honesty requires the admission that nothing compels this translation, and that Gen 35.7 might merely be another case where the plural predicator is stylistic.

15 See Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 303.

While David's prayer credits God with redeeming Israel (עמך אשר פדית לך), מלאך יהוה (ממצרים), other passages cast a second deified figure in that role, the מלאך יהוה. For example, in Judg 2.1-5 the מלאך יהוה appeared at Bochim and declared to the people of Israel, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers" (2.1). The first person language is not surprising, since it was the role of a messenger to effectively stand in the place of the sender as though he were the sender. Indeed, this is one reason why the מלאך יהוה is so tightly identified with *YHWH* in the Hebrew Bible. What is more noteworthy is the fact that in the same passage where *YHWH* announces that his name would be in this angel, the text specifically has *YHWH* telling Moses that this angel would guard Israel on its journey and bring the nation to the land *YHWH* had promised (Exod 23.20-23). Judges 2.1-5 has the angel reminding Israel of just this role. Earlier in the Exodus narrative, *YHWH* and the מלאך יהוה had both appeared together as distinct entities (Exod 3.1-6; 14.19 [cp. 14.24]). As noted earlier, given the fact that Jewish interpreters in the Second Temple Period based the two powers idea on the מלאך יהוה as the man of war who was *YHWH*, it is possible that the plural predicator in 2 Sam 7.23 is there to credit both *YHWH* and the מלאך יהוה with the redemption from Egypt. Second Samuel 7.23 then, along with the previous example of Gen 35.7, may perhaps be taken as an instance where האלהים and אלהים are semantically plural but no foreign deities are in view. Consequently, the translator may have justification for a plural translation, but readers may again have difficulty in understanding the decision and be faced with a mixture of singular and plural elements in the translation.

### 3.3. Exodus 22.6-8 (English 22.7-9)

<sup>6</sup>When a man gives money or goods to another for safekeeping, and they are stolen from the man's house—if the thief is caught, he shall pay double; <sup>7</sup>if the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall depose (בקרבו "come near") before God (האלהים) that he has not laid hands on the other's property. <sup>8</sup>In all charges of misappropriation—pertaining to an ox, an ass, a sheep, a garment, or any other loss, whereof one party alleges, "This is it"—the case of both parties shall come before God (האלהים): he whom God (אלהים) declares guilty (ירשיען) shall pay double to the other. (NJPS, Hebrew versification)

Despite a plural predicator with אלהים as grammatical subject in v. 8, this passage is frequently put forth in discussions of divine plurality as a proof-text *against* that idea being present in the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars who deny that the plural אלהים in Ps 82.1b are divine beings assume that האלהים/האלהים in Exod 22.6-8 are human beings (the elder-judges of Israel) and transfer that assumption to Ps 82.1b to argue that the psalmist is describing Israelite judges, not gods in a divine council. The plural predicate in Exod 22.8 (ירשיען) allegedly supports this view, for surely the passage speaks of Israel's judges rendering decisions for the people. This

argument of course depends on whether אלהים in Exod 22.8 is to be taken as singular or plural, and whether it in fact refers to human beings.<sup>16</sup>

Behind the assumption that אלהים in Exod 22.8 is to be understood as semantically plural with human beings as the referent is the story of the judges appointed by Moses at the suggestion of his father-in-law, Jethro. This account is found in Exod 18.13-24:

<sup>13</sup>Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. <sup>14</sup>But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" <sup>15</sup>Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God (אלהים). <sup>16</sup>When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God." <sup>17</sup>But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; <sup>18</sup>you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. <sup>19</sup>Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God (אלהים) be with you! You represent the people before God (האלהים): you bring the disputes before God (האלהים), <sup>20</sup>and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. <sup>21</sup>You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and <sup>22</sup>let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. <sup>23</sup>If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied." <sup>24</sup>Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said. (NJPS)

There is nothing in the text of this passage that compels us to understand אלהים or האלהים as semantically plural, something that is essential for the notion that the

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16 Even if Exod 22.8-9 is best understood as a group of Israel's elder-judges rendering judgment for the people, that conclusion does nothing to support the view that Ps 82 speaks of a council of human beings. Those who offer this objection seem universally to omit Ps 89.7 (English 89.6) from the discussion: "For who in the skies (בשחק) can be compared to the Lord? Who among the sons of God (בבני אלים) is like the Lord?" The בני אלים in this psalm are clearly in heaven, not on earth, which undermines the objection that one cannot have a council of divine beings in Ps 82. Importing Exod 22.8-9 into Ps 89 would force one to argue that Israel's judges were put in authority over the nations of the earth, a situation exactly opposite the biblical idea that the foreign nations were given over to other divine beings (Deut 4.19-20; 32.8-9, 43 [with LXX and Qumran]). On the divine council in Ps 82 see G. Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 22-47; Lowell K. Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 51-66; W. S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" *Biblica* 76.2 (1995): 219-28; Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 29-126; Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," 123-37. On Deut 32.8-9, see Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32.8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 52-74.



men appointed in the episode are a convenient explanation for the אלהים of either Exod 22.8 or Psa 82.1b. Each occurrence of אלהים or האלהים in this passage can quite readily refer to the God of Israel. Additionally, the men appointed by Moses are never actually called אלהים or האלהים in the text. This account, then, lends no support to the argument that אלהים with plural predicator in Exod 22.8 is to be understood as referring to a group of human judges.

While nothing in Exod 18.13-24 suggests divine plurality so as to shed light on Exod 22.8, there is one other passage that speaks of אלהים in a context similar to that of Exod 22.8. Exodus 21.2-6 must be brought into the discussion:

<sup>2</sup>When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. <sup>3</sup>If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. <sup>4</sup>If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. <sup>5</sup>But if the slave plainly says, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free," <sup>6</sup>then his master shall bring him to God (האלהים),<sup>17</sup> and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

The argument is put forth by some that the master is commanded to bring the slave before the elder-judges of Israel before piercing his ear, and that these judges are called האלהים. This position appears coherent, but there are obstacles to its lucidity.

First, האלהים could be semantically singular, referring to the God of Israel. The promise about the status of the slave is being made in truth before God. Second, if the form is indeed best understood as plural, there is evidence that the scribes did not interpret the plurality as referring to human beings. Later redactors apparently saw האלהים as semantically *plural* since the parallel to it found in Deut 15.17 *removes* the word האלהים from the instruction. This omission is inexplicable if the term was taken as singular, referring to *YHWH*. Why would the God of Israel need to be removed from this text? Moreover, if האלהים had been construed as plural and referring to Israel's judges, the deletion is just as puzzling. What harm would there be if the point of the passage was that Israel's judges needed to approve the status of the slave? The excision on the part of the Deuteronomist is quite understandable, though, if האלהים was intended as a semantically plural word that referred to gods. More than seventy years ago, Cyrus Gordon pointed out that the omission in Deuteronomy appears to have been theologically motivated.<sup>18</sup> Gordon argued that האלהים in Exod 21.6 referred to "household gods" like the *teraphim*. Bringing a slave into one's home in patriarchal culture required the consent and approval of one's ancestors. Under Deuteronomistic redaction this phrase was

17 The NJPS translation adds a note here: "to the judges."

18 Cyrus H. Gordon, "אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139-44.

omitted in the wake of Israel's struggle with idolatry. Only a plural referring to multiple divine beings can coherently explain the deletion.

Setting aside the Deuteronomist's fear that the text could be misunderstood, what then is the best understanding of האלהים in Exod 21.6—and, of course, Exod 22.8? F. C. Fensham's work comparing both passages to ancient Near Eastern material is helpful in this regard.<sup>19</sup> Fensham, citing the work of A. Goetze, discerned that these two passages had very close parallels in the Laws of Eshnunna. The latter legal code places the swearing of the oath at the gate of a temple, and so the oath would be made before a deity. This would suggest that האלהים/אלהים in the two Exodus texts should be understood as the singular God of Israel. This conclusion is bolstered by the observation of Durham that the terminology used in the Exodus passages for "drawing near" to האלהים/אלהים frequently denotes drawing near to the divine presence, the place of theophany.<sup>20</sup> Current database technology supports Durham. A search for the lemma קרב utilized in any form of predication with a divine being as the target of the lemma's motion yields twenty-three such instances, nineteen of which are in Leviticus and Numbers.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the interpreter is on firm footing regarding האלהים/אלהים as semantically singular, referring specifically to the God of Israel. But while this information closes one door, it opens another.

Although the semantic singular interpretation is a sound choice for translators, the fact that the "drawing near" (קרב) language of Exod 22.8 is associated with theophany means that a semantically plural אלהים could be in view by virtue of the plural predication. It is well known to scholars of Israelite religion that there are dramatically close parallels between the Israelite Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle and the tent of El and his divine council at Ugarit.<sup>22</sup> The tent of El at Ugarit was the place where decrees were handed down from the council, and the New Testament contains at least one line of tradition that had the heavenly host (angels) dispensing the Law at Sinai (Acts 7.53; Gal 3.19; Heb 2.2).<sup>23</sup> If the servant of Exod 22.8 was indeed taken to the Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle to stand before אלהים, it may be that the belief of those who witnessed the event was that YHWH and his council would render some sign of approval or disapproval. Durham speculates that the decision was determined through the use of the Urim and Thummim, but the text does not actually describe the procedure.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, a semantically plural referent must be considered possible, but evidence is lacking for a reasonable degree of certainty.

19 F. Charles Fensham, "New Light on Ex 21:6 and 22:7 from the Laws of Eshnunna," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78.2 (1959): 160-61.

20 James I. Durham, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary 3; Dallas: Word, 2002), 326.

21 This search was performed with Andersen and Forbes, *The Hebrew Bible*. The Andersen-Forbes database includes semantic tags, and so the search could be constrained to instances where the "drawing near" occurred with respect to a noun of deity.

22 See Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*; Clifford, "The Tent of El," 221-27.

23 Deut 33.1-2 and Ps 68.17 are possibly the backdrop to this tradition.

24 Durham, *Exodus*, 326.

### 3.4. Genesis 20.13 and Genesis 31.53

Genesis 20 records the story of Abraham's deception of Abimelech by creating the impression that Sarah was his sister and not his wife. After Abraham's ruse is revealed to Abimelech, he is forced to explain his deceit. Abraham says in Gen 20.13, "And when God (אלהים) caused me to wander (התען) from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'"

Several questions are raised by the plural verb form.<sup>25</sup> Is Abraham remembering his divine call in polytheistic terms? Does Gen 20.13 imply that Abraham's initial call to leave Ur was some sort of "prophetic call narrative" involving the divine council? Is the plural used by the writer only because Abraham is speaking to someone who is not a follower of *YHWH*? That is, is the plural supposed to be taken by readers as an example of Abraham "speaking the language of polytheism" to a polytheist? How is this statement in Gen 20.13 to be reconciled with the call of Abram by *YHWH* in Gen 12.1? Should the interpreter ignore the plural verb form in Gen 20.13 as indicating plurality at all? Is this text akin to Exod 22.8, where the plural predication does not indicate a divine plurality?

In addressing these questions, it should be noted that the call of Abram by a lone deity in Gen 12.1 does not rule out divine plurality. In divine council type scenes that involve a prophetic call, one does find divine plurality despite the call being issued by *YHWH*.<sup>26</sup> The most transparent example is Exod 3, the burning bush incident, where both the angel and *YHWH* are in the bush. The plural in Gen 20.13 could conceivably suggest a similar situation. Consequently, the divine council type scene option can be a coherent choice for dealing with the plural predication, but the text does not provide enough detail to draw that conclusion. As a result, אלהים in Gen 20.13 might also be singular despite the plural verb form.

Either of the above options is consistent with other depictions of Abraham as a worshipper of *YHWH*. However, the wider context of the Abram/Abraham narrative serves to complicate matters. Backing up a bit from Gen 12.1 to Gen 11.31, we read that Terah had taken Abram, Sarai, and the rest of his family out of Ur prior to the divine call in 12.1. Terah, Abram, and the rest get as far as Haran, where they stop and settle. Terah is considered a polytheist by most scholars on the basis of Josh 24.2:

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25 The Samaritan Pentateuch reads הַתַּעֲנֶה in the place of the plural הַתַּעֲנֶן, and so that variant must at least be considered a possible original reading, the principle of *lectio difficilior* notwithstanding.

26 Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31.3 (2007): 259-73; Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964): 279-86; Max E. Polley, "Hebrew Prophecy within the Council of Yahweh Examined in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting," in *Scripture in Context: Essays in the Comparative Method* (ed. Craig D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and James B. White; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980), 141-56; Christopher R. Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109.2 (1990): 229-47.

And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served (עֲבָדוּ) other gods.’”

The plural verb (עֲבָדוּ) and the plural noun “your fathers” are of interest. Joshua is speaking to the Israelites in this declaration. It would be convenient to argue that only Terah and Nahor worshipped other gods, excluding Abram from that description, but the text does not make this careful distinction. The most straightforward reading is that Abram is to be included in the plural verb form as one who worshipped other gods at the time of his initial call.

At this juncture it is appropriate to introduce Gen 31.53, another instance of plural predicator with אֱלֹהִים as subject, since it also references Abram, Nahor, and Terah.

<sup>51</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. <sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. <sup>53</sup> The God (אֱלֹהֵי) of Abraham and the God (אֱלֹהֵי) of Nahor, the God (אֱלֹהֵי) of their father, judge (שִׁפְטוּ) between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.

At issue are the plural verb form שִׁפְטוּ and the relationship of this verse to what is said about Terah, Nahor, and Abraham in Josh 24.2. There appear to be three possibilities: (1) Each occurrence of אֱלֹהִים in the construct is to be read as semantically singular. The point would be that the chief deity worshipped by each individual is called on as a witness. At least two and perhaps three deities are therefore invoked. The plural would therefore be understandable, and Abraham’s depiction as a *YHWH* worshipper elsewhere would be unmarred. (2) The writer wants the reader to see a contrast between the singular אֱלֹהֵים of Abraham and the plural אֱלֹהִים of Nahor and Terah. This option presumably had rhetorical-theological value for the writer. Once again the plural predication is comprehensible and the writer has Abraham worshipping only *YHWH*. (3) Each occurrence of אֱלֹהִים is to be read as a plural. The gist of the text would then be that the gods of each figure are invoked as witnesses. The plural predication would be expected. That the gods of Abraham are invoked could be reconciled with the understanding of Gen 20.13, that Abraham, like prophetic figures before and after his time, had a theophanic encounter with the divine council at his call.

The passing mention of the “Fear of Isaac” in the last line of Gen 31.53 may provide a basis for ranking the possibilities in order of likelihood. Some scholars consider the “Fear of Isaac” to be a deity distinct from *YHWH*, but most would take the phrase as an epithet for the God of Jacob.<sup>27</sup> In Gen 31.42, a verse that also refers to the Fear of Isaac, the verbs associated with the deity are singular. In any event, Gen 31.53 has Jacob swearing by only one deity, the Fear of Isaac, and so

<sup>27</sup> M. Köckert, “Fear of Isaac,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 330-31.

the third interpretive option above, which posited each occurrence of אלהים as semantically plural, seems less likely.

### 3.5. Psalm 58.12 [English 58.11]

Readers familiar with Ps 82, the classic divine council text in the Hebrew Bible, will immediately detect the conceptual and lexicographic overlaps between that psalm and Ps 58.

In Ps 82.1-5 the אלהים of the divine council are judged by the singular אלהים of Israel (82.1) for perverting the administration of the nations, a role given to them in Deut 4.19-20; 32.8-9.<sup>28</sup> After such accusations are leveled in Ps 82.2-5, the gods are sentenced to die like humans (82.6-7). Immediately after the sentence is announced (82.8) the psalmist exclaims, “Arise, O God (אלהים), judge the earth (שפטה הארץ)!” That אלהים in Ps 82.8 is singular is unmistakable in light of the singular cohortative (קומה “arise!”). A direct contrast between the singular אלהים of Israel and the אלהים under judgment is put forth by the writer.

This contrast in Ps 82 is key to sorting out several issues in Ps 58. If one accepts the emendation of אלם in 58.2 (English 58.1) to אלים,<sup>29</sup> the first two verses of the psalm open with a rhetorical denunciation of the gods who were set over the nations, just as in Ps 82: “Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods (אלים)? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth.” Psalm 58.2 thus reiterates the charges brought against the plural אלהים in Ps 82.

In keeping with the parallelism between the two psalms, the reader expects Ps 58 to close with the psalmist’s plea for the God of Israel to set things right as the true sovereign of the nations. It is precisely at this point (Ps 58.12[11]) that אלהים occurs as the subject of a plural participle. In light of the negative portrayal of the gods in 58.2(1), a denunciation quite consistent with Ps 82, it would seem that the same contrast as found in Ps 82 is intended by the psalmist in Ps 58.12(11). If this is the case, then אֵךְ יֵשׁ-אֱלֹהִים שְׁפִטִים בְּאֵרֶץ should be translated with אלהים as semantically singular, despite the plural predication (“surely there is a God who judges on earth”). A singular translation also appears required by the fact that in Ps 58.7a(6a) the psalmist asks, through 2ms imperative forms, the singular אלהים (YHWH in 58.7b[6b]) to judge violently the wicked who have been manipulated by the gods. It would make little sense, after denouncing the gods and calling on

28 Deuteronomy 32.8-9, 43 should be contextualized with Deut 4.19-20; 17.3; 29.25; Ps 82; and Ps 89.6-9(5-8). See Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” 52-74; idem, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 18.1 (2008): 1-31.

29 On this emendation and subsequent repositing, see Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Word Biblical Commentary 20; Dallas: Word, 2002), 82; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100* (Anchor Bible 16; New York: Doubleday, 1968), 57.

the God of Israel for judgment, to have the psalmist finding solace in the gods judging the earth.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.6. First Samuel 28.13

The final instance of אלהים as the subject of plural predication is 1 Sam 28.13. This text has little to do with the Israelite divine council, but nonetheless merits some attention.

First Samuel 28.13 is part of the medium of Endor narrative. After being solicited by Saul to conjure the dead prophet Samuel, the medium exclaims, אלהים ראיתי עלים מן-הארץ. Our discussion to this point informs us that the text could be translated two ways: “I saw gods coming up from the earth” or, “I saw a god/an אלהים coming up from the earth.” The former is admissible if one presumes that the medium saw a group and then zeroed in on the deceased Samuel, but this is reading into the text. The latter would take the plural participle as an instance of morphological agreement. Saul’s subsequent questions do not help explicate the issue, since his concern is naturally only with Samuel. As a result, while a plural translation is possible there is nothing to commend it, especially since the focus of the narrative is the conjuring of Samuel.

## 4. Conclusion

The infrequent grammatical agreement of אלהים or האלהים as the subject of plural predication occurs in some intriguing passages. Excluding instances where the grammatical agreement refers to foreign gods or is placed in the mouth of a foreigner, several of these instances allow אלהים or האלהים to be understood as semantically plural. These passages may, therefore, hint at the presence of the Israelite divine council. However, the evidence does not compel this conclusion, and so a semantic plural must be considered only a coherent choice, not the only choice. And while coherent, the translator ultimately must decide on what produces the most clarity for his or her intended audience.

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30 Further support for allowing the parallel with Ps 82 to guide the translation of Ps 58.12 comes from portrayals of the God of Israel elsewhere in the psalms, where it is the singular אלהים who is described as the judge of the nations of the earth. Psalm 67.4 affirms “you judge the peoples with equity”; כִּי־הַשֹּׁפֵט עִמִּים (הַשֹּׁפֵט כֻּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט; (מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל) and Gen 18.25 (“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”); כִּי־הַשֹּׁפֵט כֻּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט; (מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל) express the same idea. There seems to be no compelling evidence for taking אלהים in Ps 58.12 to be plural deities.