

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

### Episode 249

### Did Israelites View Their Judges as Gods?

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### Episode Summary

The word *elohim* frequently speaks of a single deity, most notably the God of Israel, in the Hebrew Bible. Exceptions include Psalm 82:1, 6, where plural *elohim* refers to the members of God's heavenly host (his council or assembly; cp. Psa 89:5-7). Dr. Heiser has devoted a great deal of attention to how such passages and such thinking should not be defined by modern readers as polytheism or henotheism. Though he has written extensively in published scholarly journals on the topic and in his best-selling book, *The Unseen Realm*, some opponents of the straightforward reading of Psalm 82 and other passages insist that the *elohim* of that psalm are people—specifically, Israelite judges. This episode of the podcast examines the proof-texts of such an idea and shows their deficiencies.

Material in this episode is drawn from Dr. Heiser's article, "Should אלהים (*'elōhîm*) with Plural Predication be Translated "Gods"? *BT Vol. 61, No. 3: 123-136*. This article is not accessible online, but can be accessed only via a theological or university library or by subscribing to Dr. Heiser's **newsletter**. Papers read at conferences and other articles that address divine plurality in Psalm 82 and elsewhere are freely available at Dr. Heiser's **divine council** website.

For how this episode and its content relates to Jesus' use of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34, see **Episode 109: John 10: Gods or Men?**

### Transcript

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 249: Did the Israelites View Their Judges as Gods? I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how does it feel to be home after the conferences?

**MH:** Wonderful. I don't even have to think about that. [laughs]

**TS:** Yeah. It's a lot of work. I appreciated people sending me their comments about how much they appreciate the conferences, and they always look forward to them every year. So that makes it worthwhile, that we get good feedback like that. Because it *is* a lot of work, trying to wrangle all of those...

**MH:** Yeah. String all of those together.

**TS:** Schedules... And it's...chaos.

**MH:** Just think of herding cats with Ph.Ds. That's pretty much what you've got.

**TS:** And it's not easier because they have Ph.Ds.

**MH:** Right. [laughs] In some cases, it's harder. [laughs]

**TS:** That is true. But it was fun. So I guess we can check that one off. Another one down in the books.

**MH:** Yep. Another one down. Another set of interviews down. So I already know we're going to have to go back to my pastor, Dave, and do something special with him. Because I know people will want the dirt.

**TS:** Absolutely. And I got a comment where somebody emailed about Sam, about his topics about...

**MH:** Oh, yeah, that snake handling theology!

**TS:** Yeah!

**MH:** Yeah, we've got to have him on to do that. That'll be entertaining, to say the least. [laughs]

**TS:** Yeah. *And*, Mike, we were talking beforehand, and I projected our 300<sup>th</sup> episode. It looks like it's going to land on our live meet-up night in San Diego next year for our conferences. So that means we've got at least a year to plan. So we've got to do some kind of special party for people to help us celebrate our 300<sup>th</sup> episode. So that worked out perfectly.

**MH:** Yeah. Maybe I'll bring the pugs for that. [laughs]

**TS:** We've got to do something big and grand because 300 is a big milestone.

**MH:** Yeah. It is. It really is. I thought 100 was a milestone, but here we are talking about 300.

**TS:** It's crazy how time flies. It does not stop. The flat earth does not stop spinning.

**MH:** Right. [laughs] It's still spinning.

**TS:** Alright, Mike. We mentioned on some previous episodes that we were going to have Tim and Jon from the Bible Project on this week, but due to unfortunate circumstances, we're going to have to reschedule that interview.

**MH:** That happens. Tim's not feeling well. So we want him at his best. We don't want half of Tim.

**TS:** There you go. So what have you prepared for us today, sir?

**MH:** Well, I wanted to get into a subtopic of a familiar topic, because of (for lack of a better way of putting this) "internet chatter." So I want to talk today about, did the Israelites view their judges as gods? And this is a topic related to Psalm 82. I'm not going to rehash Psalm 82. I've written so much about it. Most of that's free. Of course, there's *Unseen Realm*, which is not free.

The fact that Psalm 82, understood in its own context, is very transparently talking about God and his heavenly host, and the members of those heavenly host are called *elohim* (supernatural beings)... There are some people out there in Christian Middle Earth Land (the wild world of the internet and YouTube) that when they hear this, they resist it, I think mostly because they have not examined the subject. But they have this reflex response: "Oh, those aren't gods in Psalm 82; they're just men. In fact, they're just Israelites, because the Israelites thought... And they called their leaders—the 'judges', like appointed in Exodus 16—gods. And that's what's going on here, so Mike's silly idea of a Divine Council, even though that phrase is actually used in Psalm 82:1 (the *edah el*—the divine assembly). This is an assembly of people, an assembly of Israelite judges." And we've talked about how that doesn't make sense before, when we did an episode on why Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34. (That's episode 109, by the way.) And it's a very silly proposition, but it's a default opinion that you will see in a lot of New Testament commentaries, and of course out on the internet.

5:00 Basically the reason is, the folks who say such things either are not trained in Old Testament Semitics and Israelite religion. You don't have to do that stuff if you're a New Testament scholar. You never get into it. There'd really be no reason for you to be looking at Psalm 82 and subjects like the Divine Council and all that stuff. So it's completely off the radar, even to New Testament scholars. And I've had New Testament scholars tell me that. And I understood it. But it's nice to hear it from them and people who like the book whose field is New Testament. That's understandable. And then, on the other hand, you have people who are just content with default arguments and prooftexts because they don't want to do

the work and the research. They don't even want to read the material that they're criticizing.

So I thought this would be a good topical thing to get into—this very specific topic, this very specific question. Did, in fact, the Israelites view their judges as gods? Because in the course of doing this back in episode 109 and in some other things that I've said in Q&As, I have referred to an article that I've published with *Bible Translator*. (*Bible Translator* is a scholarly journal.) This was back in (I believe) 2010, and the article is entitled, "Should Elohim with Plural Predication be Translated 'Gods'?" And even though the title doesn't sound like it, it takes this topic on directly in the content of the article. So I've referred to things in that article. I've tried to summarize the material in that article.

But I've noticed there's some internet chatter among certain apologists, or just people who just don't want to do the work, and somehow they think they can dismiss Divine Council stuff (Psalm 82 stuff) with a proof-text. So I thought, let's just talk about that proof-text. So I think the best way to do that is that I'm going to quote extensively from this article and unpack the issues in the article. And this article is not publicly accessible on the internet. The only way you can get it is to live near a seminary or university library that subscribes to JSTOR or the ATLA Religion Database, or you can subscribe to my newsletter, because I'll put it in the protected folder for newsletter subscribers. But I'm going to quote extensively from this article and try to navigate through this topic to show our listeners that this is an incoherent argument to say that the gods of Psalm 82 are men. And we're going to get into some specific proof-texts that you'll see in comments on some of my YouTube videos or my website. "Oh, silly Heiser. Doesn't he know this verse?" Yeah. Yeah, I know that verse, and we're going to find out today that *you don't* know that verse very well. You haven't really thought deeply about it and the implications and its context.

So let's just jump in here. I've given you the source (this article I did), so I'm going to move in and out of the article, and if you want to follow along, you can always subscribe to the newsletter and get the article and see what I'm quoting and what I'm not quoting. I'll try to telegraph it, but I may not always succeed. To set the topic up, I'll start out with something that's in the article, where I write:

אלהים frequently speaks of a single deity, most notably the God of Israel. The singularity of אלהים is indicated in other ways as well. Specifically, there are the numerous instances where אלהים is found in syntactical apposition with the divine name, YHWH...

In other words, *Yahweh Elohim*. You'll actually see that combination. Well, that tells you, since there's only one Yahweh, then when it's partnered with the word *elohim*, that *elohim* is singular there. It's very simple. Other times, you get *elohim*

aligned with a singular verb form, a singular predicate (predication), and that tells you that we're talking about, semantically, one *elohim* in view. In still other places,

In Deut 4:35, for instance, the reader is told that מלבדו עוד אין האלהים הוא יהוה ("YHWH, he is *the* God...").

There's an article in *elohim*, describing the singular deity, Yahweh. So that points to the uniqueness of this *elohim*. It's very obviously singular. I go on to write:

There are, of course, exceptions to how אלהים and האלהים are used by the biblical writers. It is fairly common to have אלהים used in its construct form in plurality phrases like the "gods of Egypt."

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So if you were looking at an Interlinear and you were looking at the phrase "gods of Egypt" in Logos software or some other software, if you hovered over "gods," you would see that it is plural. It's a plural construct form, and it's qualified by "of Egypt." And there, if it's the gods of Egypt, it's supposed to be understood as a group (the plural gods of Egypt). The context very clearly tells you that. There are other phrases like "other gods" (*elohim acherim* – other *elohim*). That's not going to be singular. It's going to be talking about the gods of the nations. There are very obvious examples where plurality is easily detectable and singularity is easily detectable. This is really not surprising.

The question, though, what's a little more interesting, is that... We have to ask ourselves whether or not *elohim* or *ha elohim* (*elohim* with the article) are ever to be taken as semantically plural in contexts where the gods of the nations are not in view. Of course, if you're paying attention and if you're familiar with Divine Council stuff, this would be something akin to what happens in Psalm 82, where you have *elohim* and specifically in Psalm 82:1, *bqereb elohim* (in the midst of the *elohim*), he (the lone *elohim* of Israel) passes judgment.

So it's very obvious in that verse that we're not talking really about foreign deities; we're talking about something going on in the heavenly host. Now, foreign deities are going to be judged, but we have a group here that God is presiding over. So it's a little bit of a different feel than just sniping at the gods of Egypt or something like that. It's a little bit different there. We further have to ask ourselves, are there any instances where *elohim* or *ha elohim* might be speaking of people? And here's where we're going to get into the guts of the episode. Because there are a few passages where *elohim* is used with a plural verb form that those who want to deny divine plurality in Psalm 82 will proof-text these verses and say, "Look, see, the *elohim* there. It goes with a plural verb." And the passage is talking about people, so the gods must be people, and the people must be gods there. As we're going to see, that's really not the case, and it's

easy to say, but people say it because they haven't actually looked closely at what's going on and the bigger picture of whether we can really conclude that when *elohim* is used with a plural verb form that it's supposed to be understood as semantically plural. In many of the cases, the answer is clearly no, and that's going to become important in our discussion. So, as I wrote in the article:

Recent syntactic database development [technology] allows the scholar / translator [again, I'm writing for the journal called *Bible Translator*] to construct a query for אֱלֹהִים and האֱלֹהִים as the subject of a clause whose predicator is plural, specifically a third person plural finite verb. And you get six instances of that, so it's kind of rare. The six are: Genesis 20.13; 35.7; Exodus 22.8; 2 Samuel 7.23; 1 Kings 19.2; 20.10.

If we loosen up the query a little bit, we're not specifically asking for a third person plural, but any plural, and then you get a four other hits. Those passages are: Genesis 31.53; 1 Samuel 28.13 (which should be familiar to people in this audience—that's the medium at Endor passage); 1 Kings 12.28; and Psalm 58.12 (And in English, that's Psalm 58:11.)

Now you have a small group of passages where you have *elohim* occur with a plural verb form, and I'm going to start here... You may not be able to detect... Why is this important to answering people who want to say the gods of Psalm 82 are just people? Why do I need to get into all of this grammar? You'll be able to figure that out very quickly. I'm going to go through some examples, and I'll just telegraph it. People who do this, who are going to use these prooftexts... There's going to be two specific passages I have in mind, and we'll discuss them both. There are two passages. One is in Exodus 22. The other one is in Exodus 21. They'll go to these passages and say, "Look, there's people in the context. We have *elohim* with the plural verb, so the *elohim* must be the people and the people must be the *elohim*, and therefore, Mike's wrong in Psalm 82. We're just going to plug the people in there." Of course, they don't look at Psalm 89, where the council is in the heavens, but we won't worry about that for the sake of this episode. We want to stick to the passages.

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So they'll prooftext these passages, and then try to take the results of that to Psalm 82. And their proof-texting depends on two things. It depends on the term *elohim* in those passages actually referring to supernatural beings as opposed to the singular God of Israel. It depends on the plurality. It depends on whether we have a plurality of supernatural beings. And it also depends on whether the grammar sort of forces that conclusion. So we're looking at how some passages are prooftexts, but I want to start with passages where it's going to be easy for you to see, even if you're not looking at Hebrew—even if you don't know any Hebrew. If you just know some basic English grammar, it's going to be easy for you to see that just because we have *elohim* in a verse with the plural verb form,



we are not supposed to understand that as plural gods but still understand it as the singular God of Israel. And that's going to become important when we go to these passages that are proof-texted by people on the web.

So let's jump into some of the specifics. I just gave you the list of the verses where this happens. We're going to shave a few off that really don't merit consideration. For example, the ones in 1 Kings 19:2 and 20:10 can sort of be eliminated from the discussion since both of those examples are statements out of the mouth of Jezebel. Of course she's going to be using *elohim* as plural to refer to other gods, because she's a pagan. She says, "May the gods do to me thus and so if I don't have Elijah put to death by this time tomorrow" —some statement like that. Since she's a pagan, of course she's thinking of plural gods. So that's not really going to help us. She's obviously not thinking of the gods as *men*; she's thinking of her gods, her pantheon.

First Kings 12:28 is the same, since the speaker is Jeroboam, who wasn't exactly an orthodox Israelite. Jeroboam, of course, is cast by the biblical writers as very subversive of orthodox Yahweh worship. In order to deter the people residing in his renegade kingdom... Remember, he got the 10 tribes to defect after Solomon's death and then he set up golden calves and stuff in the north in alternative places of worship. In order to get people residing in his turf from making pilgrimages into the kingdom of Judah (where the Davidic line was still ruling and where the temple was), the biblical writers have Jeroboam making calves of gold and declaring, as the Israelites had at Sinai, "Behold your gods, O Israel!" So when Jeroboam uses this language, he's referring to golden calves. It's very easy to see. So the remaining texts that we do need to say something about... I'm not going to go through all of them. I'm going to go through a couple first that clearly show (even though you have this grammatical relationship with *elohim* and the plural verb) it's still speaking of the singular God of Israel. We're going to do two of those, and then I'm going to go into these prooftexts. So the two are Genesis 35:7, and then I'm going to go to the one in 2 Samuel. They're the most obvious for us to see this point—that we might still just be speaking of the lone God of Israel, even though we have this grammatical thing with the plural verb.

So Genesis 35:7 is interesting. I've mentioned this before in things I've written—different talks, lectures, and whatnot. Sometimes it's in my list of what gets called an *elohim*, other than the God of Israel. But I'll always make the qualification that it might be about the Angel of the Lord, who is Yahweh anyway, but he's different. He's distinct. We're going to get into that here briefly. So Genesis 35:7. I'm going to read you the first seven verses, so you get a feel for what the passage actually says:

<sup>1</sup> God (אלהים) said to Jacob [Elohim said to Jacob], “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God (לאֵל) [and there, it’s not *elohim*; it’s just “El,” so it’s clearly singular] 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 [the teraphim—at least, we’re going to find out that that’s what’s in view] 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 (לאֵל) [El] who answered (הענה) me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

And if that sounds like Genesis 48—Jacob’s deathbed prayer—keep that in the back of your mind. Now we have “El” here, unambiguously singular, but then the passage continues:

<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) [*ha elohim*] had revealed (נגלו) himself to him when he fled from his brother.

And there’s our plural verb (*niglu*). “Revealed” is actually a plural verb form. So in theory, you could translate it, “because there the gods had revealed themselves to him when he fled from his brother.” Now the switch from “El” to “*ha elohim*” is kind of striking. Why not just stick with “El?”

Is האלהים [*ha elohim*] to be judged as semantically singular, as the ESV translator chose, or plural?

That’s the way it translates it: “...because there God had revealed himself to him...” So is it semantically singular, as the ESV has, or should we change that and make it a plural?

There are two primary lines of support for taking האלהים [*ha elohim*—just the way the ESV does] as a singular deity, despite its grammatical agreement with a plural predicator: (1) the immediately preceding context [where we have El mentioned], 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.



So we could end the discussion there and say, “Look, it’s *El* in the first few verses, so it doesn’t matter. *Ha Elohim* here is pointing to the same God.” That should be the end of the discussion. So even though we have what looks like something that we should translate plural, it’s still pointing to one. We could end it there. But I would say that despite the general coherence of these arguments, there are also indications that Genesis 35:7 might have something to do with Divine Council stuff. In other words, there might be more than one. And I think you already know what it is. There are basically two possibilities. What episodes in Jacob’s life might he be referring to in Genesis 35? Let me just look at verse 6 again.

**<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 [or themselves] to him when he fled from his brother.**

There’s a point of context. So if we go back in Jacob’s life, there are really two candidates for when he’s fleeing from his brother. One is going to be better than the other.

The first one would be Genesis 28. This is the Jacob’s ladder—the tiered steps, the ziggurat thing, the *sulam* in Hebrew—when he has this dream.

At either the top of the structure or beside him Jacob sees YHWH (Gen 28.13). He also witnesses מלאכי אלהים (“angels of God”) ascending and descending upon the structure.

So is it possible that he’s thinking of these angels of God (that episode), and that’s why the writer (and Jacob) is thinking in Genesis 35:7 of more than one entity, hence the plural verb. Could that be what he’s thinking? Well, that might sound like it makes sense, but he didn’t build an altar to the angels of God. He only built it for the singular God of Israel. He calls it “El Bethel.” It’s the house of El, the house of a singular deity. So that’s probably not what he’s thinking of.

The second possibility is in Genesis 32. This is where Jacob wrestles the “man.” And another very famous passage where he wrestles with this man, who we find out... Jacob, at the end of it says, “Hey, I’ve seen the face of God [*elohim*, or “an *elohim*].” Hosea in particular refers to this “man” as both *malak* (an angel) and an *elohim*. This is where things lead. Genesis 48, which is a passage I’ve covered many times—where Jacob, in his deathbed prayer, uses the phrase he uses back in Genesis 35 about the God who had protected him all his days... He lumps *elohim* with “angel” in the same prayer and even fuses them in that case with the singular verb. But we still have two. The two are one. You have the

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transcendent Yahweh, and then the Yahweh who appears as a man. So maybe, that's why, when Jacob is thinking back to this episode in Genesis 35:7, we have a plural verb. It could be. But it could also just as well be translated as the singular because of the first few verses leading up to verse 7, where we have *EI* twice, which is clearly singular. So at best, Genesis 35:7 does not support a plurality of divine beings, generally. It just doesn't do that. It also is very clearly not referring to people. It's probably referring either to the lone God of Israel, or maybe the second Yahweh (God in human form), and perhaps the transcendent God still in the scene somewhere. So this really doesn't help establish the points that the people who are going to be proof-texting certain verses about *elohim* and the plural verb, wanting that to be the solution for Psalm 82... It doesn't really help. The plurality is ambiguous (could just as well be singular) and we certainly don't have men in view.

Here's the second one: 2 Samuel 7:23. This is the second one we'll cover today, and this one is far less familiar. There's a good chance that unless you read the footnotes in *Unseen Realm* and looked up verses you may never have heard of this passage before, or unless you read the article ahead of time. This is a prayer of King David in 2 Samuel 7:23. David prays:

**And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth, whom God [or is it the gods, because we have *elohim* plus a plural verb?] went (הלכו־אלהים) [the verb "went" is a plural form—*holku*] 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 them out) from before your people, whom you redeemed (פדיית) for yourself from Egypt, the nations and their gods.**

So it's a prayer of David, hearkening back to these great things that God had done. Now people will notice that there's a plural verb here with *elohim*, so maybe we should say, "whom the gods went to redeem." You could say, "Maybe that's the 'two Yahwehs' thing again," just like it was in Genesis 35. In this instance, you can clearly (I think) rule all of that stuff out. I'm going to read the verse for you again, and you'll be able to... Think of just the wording.

**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 [singular] name...**

You have pronouns here, and other associated nouns that are only singular. So even though we have *elohim* here with a plural verb form, it actually

unambiguously refers back to the lone God of Israel. So this passage doesn't help, either.

Now, you say, "I still don't know why we're talking about this, Mike." Here we go. The first of two passages that people use to prooftext a plurality of humans that are called *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible and then they want to take that back to Psalm 82, and say, "We don't have a Divine Council here. Mike's just a silly guy (or a heretic or something)..." Here's the first prooftext that you're going to get. Exodus 22:6-8 (In the English, this is Exodus 22:7-9.) I'm going to read you the passage.

<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 come near (נקרב) to God (האלהים) [*ha elohim*] that he has not laid hands on the other's property.

In other words, the person who is accused is going to come near to *ha elohim* and say, "Look, I didn't do this."

<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) [*ha elohim*, just like before]: he whom God (אלהים) [*elohim*] declares guilty (ירשיען) [and there the verb is plural] shall pay double to the other.

So here we have a guy who is accused of a crime. He comes near to *ha elohim* and says, "Look, I didn't do this." If there's a disagreement... The guy who is wronged says, "Yeah, that's the guy. This is the one." Okay, now there's a dispute. "Both parties shall come before *elohim*, and the one whom *elohim* declares guilty shall pay double to the other." And since the "declaring guilty" verb is plural, people will say, "Look, here's an instance where they're coming to this group of men (the judges of Israel) and the judges of Israel decide who's guilty. What that means, then, is that these human judges are *elohim*. And then we take that back to Psalm 82." And they'll base that on the plurality of the verb form.

Now, we've already seen that it doesn't matter in other passages whether you have a plural verb or not. It can still be referring to God himself. That's why we went through those earlier passages. (And there are five or six others we could go through. I only picked two.) If you read the article (if you're subscribed to the newsletter), you'll find that every passage that has *elohim* with a plural verb can

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just as well be read “the singular God of Israel.” But no matter, because our proof-texters love to go to this verse and say, “Look, here *elohim* declares one or the other guilty, and the verb for declaring them guilty is plural, so we have a group of judges.” See, this is how this idea is argued. Now, the logic here is to take that idea, which remains to be proven, because it could just as well be the singular God of Israel, and then import it into Psalm 82 to argue that the psalmist is describing Israelite judges, not *elohim* in a Divine Council. That’s the logic. Now behind this assumption in Exodus 22:8 (that this is the way we’re supposed to read this passage), we have the story of the judges appointed by Moses at the suggestion of Jethro, his father-in-law, in Exodus 18. So people will say, “Who are these human judges that are called *elohim* here in Exodus 22?” “Oh, they’re the guys that Moses appointed back in chapter 18. Didn’t you read, Mike? Aren’t you aware of Exodus 18, when God appointed through Moses judges? Those are the *elohim*.” Yeah, I’m aware of that. It’s Exodus 18:13-24. Now when I present this visually, I turn on in my software what’s called a visual filter. It makes the Hebrew term *elohim* light up in the English translation. And you can see that every place in Exodus 18 where the word *elohim* occurs, except for one, can just as well be translated the singular God of Israel, and in fact, that’s what the ESV does. So I’m going to read the whole thing to you, and point out where *elohim* is, and you’ll see the one exception refers to foreign gods. So let’s read Exodus 18:13-24, just to make the point.

**<sup>13</sup> The 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).**

There’s our first one. Very obviously, they’re not inquiring of plural gods. They’re not saying, “Hey, Moses, can you contact the gods for us?” Obviously that’s not what’s in view. They want Moses because Moses is the one that meets face to face with God. They want Moses to ask God his opinion on this or that. And we don’t even have the judges appointed yet. So this one in ESV has “God.” “People come to me to inquire of God (*elohim*).”

**<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 [*elohim*].” <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) [*elohim*] be with you [Moses (singular)]! You [Moses (singular)] represent the people before God (האלהים) [*ha elohim*]: you [singular] bring the disputes before God (האלהים) [*elohim*... this is what you do—you represent the people before God, you bring the disputes before God...],<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 [*Elohim*], 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 [*elohim*] 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.**

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Now, you look at that. There isn't a single instance in that passages where the people who are appointed are called *elohim*. Zero. None. Nada. Human judges in Israel, not only in this passage, but in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible... There's never a verse that says something like, "And these judges shall be *elohim* to the people." There is nothing like that. There isn't a single verse that actually says that—that actually makes that assertion or claim or makes that connection. I just read ESV to you, and every instance of *elohim*... (There was one that's actually earlier in the passage that's about foreign deities.) Every instance in the passage can just as well be translated capital G-o-d. "God be with you," "God will do this for you," "You represent the people before God," "You bring the disputes before God," "You let the judges take care of the minor things, but the major ones, they come to you, and then you represent the people before God", "You ask God what he thinks."

Moses isn't asking the judges to decide the hard cases. The judges get the easy cases. The passage doesn't say, "When you get hard ones, you need to take those to *elohim* (to those *elohim* human judges)." It doesn't say that at all. The human judges get the easy stuff to unburden Moses. The hard stuff is going to be done just like it was before. "Moses, you take those cases. The people come to you, and you represent them before *ha elohim* (to God), and you will be able to teach them what *God* wants them to do." Moses isn't going to teach them what the judges want. The *elohim* are not the judges, folks. They just aren't. If you read the passage, that idea is nowhere present in the passage. There's nothing in the text of this passage that compels us to understand *elohim* or *ha elohim* as semantically plural. There just isn't—something that is essential for the notion that the men appointed in the episode are a convenient explanation for the

*elohim* of the earlier passage (Exodus 22:8), or for that matter, Psalm 82. So you can't use Exodus 18, and use that as a hermeneutical filter (or wedge or tool) to justify an interpretation that you might like in Exodus 22. You can't read Exodus 22... I'll go back to that passage right here. You can't read Exodus 22:8 where it says,

**"...both parties shall come before God: he whom God declares guilty..."**

"Oh, it's plural, so we need to read that, 'he whom the gods declare guilty,' or 'he whom the human judges declare guilty' shall pay double to the other. We need to interpret it that way because Moses appointed these guys just for that reason, back in Exodus 18." No, he didn't. No, he didn't. They're never called *elohim* there. And there is still this category of things you take (in Moses' day, it was through Moses) directly to God (capital G-o-d).

So we can't justify a human interpretation of the *elohim* in Exodus 22 on the basis of Exodus 18. It doesn't work. But that is the typical strategy that's used. I'm hoping I've illustrated it sufficiently. And there's nothing in Exodus 18 that suggests a divine plurality that can shed light on Exodus 22:8, and it's unusual. If the person trying to prooftext Exodus 22:8 figures this out and knows that it's inconsistent, they will go to another passage. So let's go to that one. They'll go to Exodus 21:2-6. And this one, frankly, is a lot more interesting. You might think that the "*elohim* are humans" idea has a point here, but it actually doesn't. It's actually something far more interesting than that. Here's Exodus 21:2-6:

<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 [or the gods, האלהים, *ha Elohim*], 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.

So if the slave wants to stay, then the master brings the slave, who says, "I want to stay here, even though I could go free." The master shall bring him to *ha elohim*. What are we dealing with here? 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. The passage doesn't actually say that, because the word for judges or elders never appears in this passage. Not once. So it's an assumption that the *ha elohim* here are those Israelite judges, back from Exodus

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18. In Exodus 18, they were never called *elohim* either. But we're making a series of guesses and assumptions that allow some to form this argument. The argument is that the slave wants to stay, so the master takes the slave to the Israelite elders and judges. I don't know what they have to decide, because the slave has already said that he wants to stay. So even the circumstance doesn't fit Exodus 18. [Laughs] Very few people who prooftext this passage even point that out. What's there to decide? There's no question. Everybody agrees already. It's a wasted trip. But again, this is the assumption. So supposedly, we bring them before the human judges who are these *elohim*. Now, to some, that sounds workable. "Oh, yeah, let's go with that." There are real obstacles to this making sense. And I've just pointed out one. There's no question to decide. You don't need to go to the judges. There's no dispute. Period. So the context doesn't fit (bringing that context—this need for elder intervention). That doesn't fit the passage, because there's no dispute.

So that's one problem. But there are other ones. Let's just mention this one. We've already mentioned the contextual incongruity. *Elohim* (or *ha elohim*) here could be semantically singular, like it is in all these other passages. It could refer to the God of Israel. In other words, the master shall bring the slave who wants to stay before God. You have a little ceremony. You present someone to the God of heaven and say, "This is what we're going to do. Thank you, Lord." Just like elders in churches now are appointed or we pray for someone publicly. We bring them before God to endorse their ministry or pray for them or send them on their way. It could very well just as easily be that kind of scene. The master is thankful. He brings the slave before God—the God of heaven—and God is his witness. "I'm not violating the law of Jubilee, Lord, because the law says we're supposed to let this person go free. He has voluntarily decided to stay." So it's kind of like a gesture of fidelity to the law before the law-giver, God himself. Could just as well be that. Because we have *elohim* with these plural verbs earlier that are clearly pointing to the singular God of Israel. Now, let's think about the plural verb, though, "bring him to God." What we want to see here is "*elohim*" as plural people, and then take that back to Exodus 22 to further argue our case, that we have people here, and somehow that works, and so now we need to take it to Psalm 82. What's really interesting is the word *ha elohim* here in verse 6. I'm going to read it again:

**Then his master shall bring him to God (האלהים), 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.**

If you look at the parallel passage to this... This is Exodus 21:2-6 (in English). If you look at the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 15, it reads the same way, except that Deuteronomy removes the word *ha elohim*. Let me say it again. In the Deuteronomy version of this procedure, *ha elohim* is gone. Now, that's

important. It's another one of these differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy. I've said before on the podcast that the most obvious version of this is Passover. The rules for Passover in Exodus 12 are quite different than what you read in Deuteronomy because the context of Deuteronomy is different. Critics will say, "That's because Deuteronomy was written later; it's not Mosaic." Those who accept Mosaic authorship for Deuteronomy will say, "The difference is because Deuteronomy looks forward to a time when we have a temple," because the laws in Deuteronomy forbid you from observing Passover in your home, when explicitly that's what you're supposed to do in Exodus. So the reasoning goes, "That's changed in Deuteronomy, because it presupposes that there's one central meeting place now, and that's why for Passover in Deuteronomy you're commanded to go to the central place of worship—the place where the Lord has chosen to set his name." So it's a different context. That's important, too, because we have to ask ourselves, "Why would they remove 'God' (or *ha elohim*) from the procedure? Why would they do this?"

Now it wouldn't make any sense if *ha elohim* was supposed to be the lone God of Israel. There would be no reason to remove him from the ceremony. It's bizarre. It just doesn't make any sense. Shouldn't God have a part in this? Aren't we honoring God by obeying this law? It doesn't make any sense. So I think we can safely rule out that *ha elohim* in this passage (in Exodus 21) is singular. So that leaves us two possibilities, both of them plural. Are the *ha elohim* human judges or are they something else? Why would you take away human judges in Deuteronomy? Why would you do that? What's wrong with human judges? Aren't they supposed to do this job? Why would you delete them in Deuteronomy? Well, the answer comes if we consider the other option. Yeah, *ha elohim* looks like it's plural here because it doesn't make any sense that it would be singular. Why would you delete God? It also doesn't make any sense to say that they're human judges, because why would you delete them? What's the danger? What are you afraid of?

It makes a lot of sense if *ha elohim* here are (as Cyrus Gordon suggested 80 years ago) your dead ancestors. Remember? Think of 1 Samuel 28:13. *Elohim* is a term that's used for the deceased human dead. In Israel, there was this notion that people after they died were still there. They were still living. This is why you created teraphim, these little figurines... We've talked about this occasionally on the podcast and even in *Unseen Realm* a little bit. Teraphim were the Polaroids of the day (pictures). They were objects that you kept in your house that were placeholders for your deceased relatives. Just like we have... This isn't a horrible heresy, although it could turn to one. It could be dangerous, and I think (as I'll say in a minute) that's the point here in the change in Deuteronomy.

But let's just think about it generally. We do the same thing. We have pictures of our deceased loved ones around. We might take offerings (like flowers or stuffed animals or some personal object) to their grave and set them there, maybe on the anniversary of a death, just as a kind gesture. What are we thinking? Are we

thinking that the dead person is going to like that? They're dead. We do it because yeah, we do think that. We think that they're watching us. We think that they're still present. And we believe in our hearts that we're going to do this kind thing and it keeps a bond there—it keeps a relationship going. And maybe this *will* make them happy. Maybe they'll see this and be pleased by it. We're not idolaters when we do this. We're not worshiping them. We're not making barter with our deceased ancestors to get something we want. We're not going through ritual ceremonies of magic to get the deceased dead to work on our behalf.

See, that's the line. That's the line that Israelites (and us, for that matter) have to be careful not to cross. That's contacting the dead. That's necromancy. And it's a fact (archeologically speaking and biblically speaking) that there were Israelites who engaged in necromancy, and it's forbidden. Deuteronomy 18, right after this passage... Right after the change in Deuteronomy 15, we get Deuteronomy 18, and necromancy is one of the forbidden practices.

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So here's what I think is going on here. And this didn't originate with me. I think Cyrus Gordon had some real insight here. In Exodus 21, you do have a plural, "bring them before the gods." So they're not human judges. They're not the lone God of Israel. They're the ancestors of your house. Why would you do that? Because this slave wants to join your household. So you want your ancestors to approve. You want them to know that you are in approval of this. It's like a family event, a family ceremony. Now, because of the danger... And Israel fell into idolatry after the conquest, didn't they? If you're a critic and you say Deuteronomy was written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, your explanation of this is that *ha elohim* is specifically removed because of Israel's history with idolatry. If you believe that Deuteronomy was authored by Moses, this is a foreshadowing. *Ha elohim* is removed because the writer wants to telegraph in some way that they went off the rails here. "They wound up doing necromantic things, and in fact, I'll get back to that three chapters later, when I talk about necromancy being forbidden by God." So it's either a historical look back at an idolatry problem or it's a foreshadowing of an idolatry problem. It has nothing to do with human judges. Zero. So if you don't have any ammunition for human judges here, you can't take this passage (Exodus 21:2-6) and use it to bolster human *elohim* judges in Exodus 22. And we've already seen, you can't use Exodus 18 to make the argument in Exodus 22, that the judges are *elohim*.

Folks, what it comes down to is that there isn't a single exegetical argument that the rulers of Israel were thought of as gods or thought of as *elohim*. Zero. This argument has no legs to stand on. But it is the standard go-to idea to make Psalm 82 not say what it plainly says. And it's because people fear divine plurality, and they fear it because they've never studied it. They fear it because they don't have their heads in the Old Testament worldview. They fear it because they don't understand that all *elohim* is is a reference to a being that is part of the supernatural world. It has nothing to do with a unique set of unique attributes. And I've said this hundreds of times. I understand when people see G-O-D,

because our brains immediately... because we're Western and we have this Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead of looking at the Hebrew Bible, we let our tradition do our theology for us. We have our tradition telling us that when you see the letters G-O-D, that points to a unique set of attributes. No, it doesn't. Because *elohim* is used of half a dozen different things that are not the God of Israel. That alone tells you it has nothing to do with a unique set of attributes. There are many *elohim*. There's only one, though, that is described in specific ways (like omniscience, sovereignty, omnipotence, the only one deserving of worship, the only creator). Only one *elohim* ever gets described in those ways. No other *elohim* are described in that way. In fact, scripture *denies* those things to other *elohim*.

Yahweh is an *elohim*. No other *elohim* is Yahweh. Period. This is a simple, straightforward, orthodox Israelite theology. But we have lost it. And because we've lost it, we go to passages like Psalm 82 and we think we have to invent ways to make the text not say what it says, right before our eyes. And the chief reflex interpretation is, "Oh, those are human judges." And there isn't a single coherent exegetical argument to base that on. We've gone through the prooftext passages (Exodus 22 and Exodus 21), both viewed in light of Exodus 18. There's nothing to these arguments. They can't stand up. They implode.

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Just to recap, if you go with Exodus 21, you have to explain the deletion of *ha elohim* in Deuteronomy 15. It can't be the singular God of Israel because it makes no sense to delete God from the ceremony. It can't be human beings, because A) there's no dispute here, so you have a violation of context, and B), it wouldn't make any sense to delete them if there was a dispute, because that's their job. So why are they deleted? Because it doesn't refer to human rulers/judges. It refers to *elohim* of a different kind, and a group—a plurality. The best way to understand *elohim* here is the disembodied dead—your family members. Because you have this slave who wants to join the family. And the writer of Deuteronomy is either looking in the past, and saying, "Good grief, we had problems with this. We're not taking any chances here. We're going to change the wording here so that nobody goes down this path again (they don't abuse this)." Or the writer is looking forward. He's telegraphing something that's going to be a problem. Because three chapters later, he talks about the problem of necromancy. This is called interpreting scripture in its own context. This is what we do at the Naked Bible Podcast. We don't invent interpretations to deflect our attention away from what the text says.

So I just thought for today it was high time that we get this recorded in some way, because this keeps coming up. I want to add one more thing. And I quote this in part of the article. There's actually a... I'll just throw it in here. There's a bit more to it that strengthens what I'm saying here. I'll just jump in here:

Setting aside the fear of the Deuteronomist that the text could be misunderstood, what then is the best understanding of האלהים [ha elohim] in Exod 21:6—and, of course, Exod 22:8?

I think it's this disembodied dead sort of thing. However, you could still make an argument, at least in Exodus 22, for the singular God of Israel.

Fensham [in his Deuteronomy commentary], citing the work of A. Goetze, discerned that these two passages had very close parallels in the Laws of Eshnunna. [This is Mesopotamian Akkadian material.] 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 [ha elohim or elohim] in the two Exodus texts should be understood as the singular God of Israel [at least in Exodus 22]. This conclusion is bolstered by the observation of Durham [that's the *Word Biblical Commentary*] that the terminology used in the Exodus passages for “drawing near” to האלהים / אלהים [ha elohim or elohim... the verb is *qarab*] frequently denotes drawing near to the divine presence, the place of theophany. [In other words, the presence of the lone God of Israel.] 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 [what are you moving toward?] yields twenty-three such instances, nineteen of which are in Leviticus and Numbers. As a result, the interpreter is on firm footing regarding האלהים / אלהים [ha elohim or elohim] as semantically singular, referring specifically to the God of Israel.

Because everywhere you have someone moving toward (*qarab*-ing) a divine presence, it's the singular God of Israel. No matter which perspective you take, there is no exegetical argument for the notion that Israelites thought of their human judges (the human bureaucracy) as *elohim*. I know you've heard it. Maybe some rabbi somewhere in the middle ages said it. We're talking about the biblical text in its own context. That's where we get our theology. Not from some medieval guy. Not from Puritan theology, or anything modern. This is what we do at the Naked Bible Podcast. We take scripture on its own terms. And when you do that, it does make sense. It makes sense. What we've talked here about these Exodus passages makes sense. Psalm 82 makes sense on its own terms. There's no need to disguise what the Bible says in places. There just isn't.

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**TS:** Alright, Mike. I kind of like you covering your articles. It's one thing to read it, but to have you explain it is so much better. Maybe we should take...

**MH:** I don't think we've ever done that.

**TS:** No, we haven't. We're four years into this, and this is the first time. We need to remedy that. We need to...

**MH:** Yeah, that might be a good idea.

**TS:** Yeah, I like that. And also, if and when we cover Exodus, you can just reference this, so we don't have to cover it.

**MH:** Right. [Laughs]

**TS:** And speaking of that, Mike, I just want to mention that our voting for the next topic is going to happen December 17<sup>th</sup> and run for the rest of the month. So be on the lookout.

**MH:** Should we tell people that they're going to get a shocker in the candidates?

**TS:** No, that's a teaser. [MH laughs] They're going to have to wait two weeks to see what that shocker is. Exodus came in second last time, so it's going to be interesting to see, with the topics that we've included... And I'm saying "topics," because it's not just books. So we'll leave it at that. We won't give any...

**MH:** We won't give away the store. [laughs]

**TS:** Alright, Mike. Hey, next week, we've got Rick Brannan on the show. We've had him on before. Could you mention...

**MH:** Something to do with the Pastoral Epistles. We don't want to steal his thunder. Specifically, 2 Timothy—that maybe the context isn't the end of Paul's life. We'll just tease it that way. And then, there are some other things we want to talk about with respect to the Pastoral Epistles with Rick.

**TS:** Alright. We'll be looking forward to that. Well, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.