

*The Theology of the Unseen Realm:
How God Uses Angels, Demons and the Holy Assembly*

“Startling Old Testament Texts”

I. The texts that should cause everyone to stop and do a double take.

A. This is a good place to begin to peer into the unseen realm.

1. Psalm 82:1

a. NIV

“¹ God presides in the great assembly;
he renders judgment among the “gods.””

b. CSB

“¹ God stands in the divine assembly;
he pronounces judgment among the gods.”

c. KJV

“¹ God standeth in the congregation of the mighty;
He judgeth among the gods.”

d. NKJV

“¹ God stands in the congregation of the mighty;
He judges among the gods.”

e. ESV

“¹ God takes His place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods He holds judgment.”

f. NASU

“¹ God takes His stand in His own congregation;
He judges in the midst of the rulers.”

1. Footnote on “rulers” – literally “gods”.

2. Examining the Hebrew text.

- a. The Hebrew word “Elohim” occurs twice in this short verse. Other than “Yahweh”, this is the most common word used in the Old Testament for “God.” It is sometimes used of angels, demons, false gods, and the spirit of man.

B. How do we understand the word “Elohim”?

1. The word form is plural or singular depending upon usage.
2. English words are made plural by adding s, es, or ies.
 - a. Ex: bookss, foxes or storyies.
3. “Elohim”, over 2000 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, is singular in referring to the God of Israel, but it may be plural, too.
 - a. “El” is the abbreviated form of “Elohim”. Both terms are better understood as a title or description. “El” is often joined with another term indicating one of God’s attributes such as ‘*el elyon* (Gen. 14:18), ‘*el roi* (Gen. 16:13), and ‘*el Shaddai* (Gen. 17:1) which are frequently translated as “God most high”. See Tim Chaffey, *Fallen, the Sons of God and the Nephilim*, pg. 52.
4. We have similar words in English that can be understood as plural or singular.
 - a. Example: moose, sheep, deer, cod, fish
 - b. It is the surrounding words in a sentence that indicates plural or singular usage.

It is the same in Hebrew for the term “*elohim*”.

C. Singular and plural in Psalm 82:1.

1. The first occurrence of “*elohim*” must be singular because the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verb form “stand”.
 - a. “God takes His stand.”
2. The second use of “*elohim*” is plural because the preposition in front of the term, “in the midst” and requires a plural understanding.



- a. “He judges in the midst of”
 - b. You cannot be in the midst of one. It must be a group.
3. Consequently, the singular Elohim presides over an assembly of plural elohim.
- a. The meaning of this text was interpreted by the NASU translators as “rulers” to avoid polytheistic overtones, but did footnote “gods” as the literal reading.

D. Understanding the Psalm.

1. God has called an assembly to judge the “gods” for corrupt rule of the nations.
 - a. Monotheism is the belief in one God while polytheism is the belief in many gods. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are ardently monotheistic.
 - b. As opposed to “polytheism” the term “henotheism” is appropriate for understanding lesser elohim. The term refers to the belief that many “gods” exist, but only one god may be worshipped. **No** other “god” is Yahweh. See Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no 1 (2008):1-30.
 1. Explanation of “lesser *elohim*”.
 - c. Chaffey prefers “Mono-Yahwism”. *Fallen*, p. 79.
 - d. Note unique attributes of Yahweh as opposed to lesser *elohim*.




2. Remainder of the Old Testament text. Psalm 82:2-8 (NASU)

² How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? Selah.

³ Vindicate the weak and fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.

⁴ Rescue the weak and needy;
Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.

⁵ They do not know nor do they understand;
They walk about in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.




⁶ I said, ‘You are gods,
And all of you are sons of the Most High.

⁷ Nevertheless you will die like men
And fall like any one of the princes.’

⁸ Arise, O God, judge the earth!
For it is You who possesses all the nations.”


3. Verse 6 makes clear that the *elohim* are “sons of God”.



a. The Hebrew is “I have said you are gods (*elohim*) and sons of the most high (*Beney Elyon*) all of you.”

4. The “Most High” “*Elyon*” is the reference of power ascribed to the God of Israel alone. Note the following texts (Genesis 14:18-22; Numbers 24:16; Psalm 7:17; 18:13; 47:2). The title “Most High” is used 42x in the OT and 8x in the NT.


a. Numbers 24:16



“¹⁶ The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
And knows the knowledge of the Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.”

b. Psalm 7:17

“¹⁷ I will give thanks to the Lord according to His righteousness
And will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High.”



5. Psalm 82 is unclear whether all of the lesser *elohim* are under judgment or just some. Yet, the “sons of God” or “sons of the Most High” are clearly called *Elohim* as the pronoun “you” in verse 6 is plural. See Hieser, IBID, 27.



a. Psalm 82:6

“⁶ I said, ‘**You** are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High.”

II. Scholarly views of Psalm 82.

A. Respected Commentators

1. Marvin Tate in the *Word Bible Commentary* makes the following points:

There is no good reason to doubt that God is the speaker in verses 2-4 and verse 7. There is some question about verse 6, though I think the speaker is God ... and quite a bit about verse 5. Verse 1 and 8 are framing verses for the speech, in between, and are probably to be understood as from an anonymous member (or members) of the divine council....

He further states:

Psalm 82 opens abruptly, without introduction, with an immediate focus on God (Yahweh) having taken his stand in the midst of a council or assembly of divine beings while he pronounces judgment (verse 1). He is clearly in charge, presiding over a meeting. ... The “gods” are divine beings who function as his counselors and agents. ... The scene is pictured as that of a divine assembly in which the Great King pronounces sentence on some of the gods who have failed in their duties. ... The judgment of the gods (verse 7) strips them of their divine status and condemns them to a “human fate of death.” ... In the context of the Bible, there is a persistent nexus between the heavenly realm and the realm of the world. Judgment activity on Earth interacts with that administered by heavenly authorities. ... The gods as patrons of the various nations were responsible for the type of kings, judges, and officials they appointed and empowered, however, the gods, not even Yahweh, do not act directly. Their will is administered by human agents, who are extensions of the divine presence in earthly affairs. Thus, the judgment of the gods is at the same time a judgment of the human agents.

See Marvin E. Tate, *Word Bible Commentary*, Vol. 20, Psalms 51-100, pp 330-340. [Emphasis mine]

a. Understanding the interface between lesser *elohim* and human beings.

1. Illustration of Bruce’s murder by Tom but incited by Sally.

2. F. F. Bruce adds: (Editor of *The International Bible Commentary*, p. 614.)

Nor is this an ordinary council meeting. It is a trial, and God presides not as a chairman but as a judge. At this celestial Nuremberg, He impatiently accuses the various national deities of misrule, of the powers delegated to them. ... Despite their supernatural rank and immortality, they are stripped of their privileges and suffer the degrading penalty of death. [Emphasis Mine]

3. Derek Kidner also adds:

The crux for the interpreter is the repeated reference to “gods” who are reprimanded for injustice. Our Lord’s reference to verse 6 in John 10:34f leaves their identity an open question.

He further remarks:

... Delitzch, Perowne and Briggs view “the gods” as only human judges (see Exodus 21:6; 22:8f). ... A second view is that these gods are principalities and powers. ... On the whole this view seems truer than the former to the language of the Psalm (e.g., verse 7) and to the occasional Old Testament use of the term “gods” or “sons of God” for angels (see Psalm 8:5, cf Job 1:6; 38:7). [Emphasis added]

See Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Psalms 73-150*, pp. 327-330.

4. VanGemeren of the highly respected *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, after interacting with other views remarks (pgs 534-535): [Emphasis Mine]


“A third view, though more difficult, is more likely. The ‘gods’ are pagan deities. The gods of the nations are portrayed in his psalm as being nothing more than subjects of God who must render an account to the God of Israel for all their evil and unjust acts. ...”

Regarding vs. 5, he states:

“The requirements of the Lord are clear (vv. 3-4). However, in contrast to his just requirements, ‘the gods’ stand condemned by their folly, moral darkness, and destruction of God’s order. The gods are nothing but fools. They show no understanding of God’s order. It is not that they are ignorant of what God expects but that they reject him and his just rule. Folly consists of a conscious rejection of God rather than ignorance of God (cf. Isa 1:3).”

Regarding vs. 6-7, he states:

“Finally, the dethronement of the gods! The Lord pronounces sentence with an emphatic “I,” which could be rendered as “It is I who says.” The condemnation is ironic. Though the gods were known as ‘the sons of the Most High’ (Elyon) in Canaanite mythology, they cannot be! They do not reflect the concerns of God with justice, morality and order.”

 B. However, some scholars only view the reference to “gods” as earthly judges.

1. Jesus’ remarks in John 10:34-36 are often cited in support of this view. J. J.



Perowne remarks: “They were sons of the highest, called by His name, bearing his image, exercising His authority, charged to execute His will, and they ought to

have been in their measure His living representatives.” See James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, Vol. II, p. 675.

- a. Are these “Sons of the Most High” divine beings or merely human judges?
- b. The lesser *elohim* view is the minority interpretation.

2. Taking a closer look at Jesus’ remarks:

a. John 10:30-38



“³⁰ ‘I and the Father are one.’ ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. ³² Jesus answered them, ‘I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?’ ³³ The Jews answered Him, ‘For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God.’ ³⁴ Jesus answered them, ‘Has it not been written in your Law, “I said, you are gods”?’ ³⁵ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), ³⁶ do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”? ³⁷ If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”


1. Those concerned over connotations of polytheism interpret “gods” as

human judges. “You never protested this use of the term. You have never said that God (or Asaph) committed an error by calling judges gods...”

(Hendriksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary: John*, p. 128.)

2. Note that verse 34 is sandwiched between two claims of Jesus’ own deity.

His assertion stresses His own deity. To interpret Psalm 82 as mere men (just about all commentators hold this view) undermines Jesus’ assertion.



Verse 30 – “³⁰ ‘I and the Father are one.’”

Verse 34 – “³⁴ Jesus answered them, ‘Has it not been written in your Law, “I said, you are gods”?’”

Verse 38 – “³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”

a. The “judges” interpretation takes two forms a) Jewish elders or b) Israelites more broadly. The idea is that the law was received by all the people at Sinai (“to whom the Word of God came,” vs. 35). Scholars assert that Psalm 82 is not technically part of the torah (first five books) and in particular, Exodus 18 where Jethro counsels Moses to appoint elders (Judges are viewed as gods in this sense which it is believed connects to Psalm 82, human judges [elohim] with God’s authority.) Yet, note that the elders of Exodus 18 are never addressed as *elohim*.


1. Note Ex. 21:6: “bring him to God” is an idiom for elders or judge.

See Galardi, *Corrective Church Discipline*, p. 52.

b. I believe the correct view of John 10 is that Jesus claims divinity by noting He is **not** a mere man. The divine beings of Psalm 82 are not mortal. This is Jesus’ first step in His argument for His own deity. The second step is that He and the Father are one, verse 38. He is Lord of the council! The human judge view does not make sense of anything noted above. The Jews understood exactly what Jesus meant, verse 39. “Elohim” as a term means residence and not a set of attributes. It identifies the proper domain.” See Michael S. Heiser, *The Naked Bible Podcast*, “Episode #109: John 20, Gods or Men?”

c. Expositors who opt for “Judges” do so because of polytheistic concerns. Yet, God is the “Most High”. **No** divine being is approximate to Him!

C. My sense is that there is more here to the meaning than earthly judges. Tate’s view (page 15) best accounts for both human and spiritual entities because of the interaction between the two. Ross summaries:



The Psalmist would not have accepted the idea that they were viable gods, but rather that they were supernatural beings or angels, who formed a heavenly court (meaning an assembly of supernatural beings appearing before God to receive their orders. See Job 1 & 2 in which assembly even Satan was present). These angelical beings were given the responsibility of overseeing the proper functioning of human society (see Deut. 32:8-9). However, many of them failed to comply with the divine commission and became the forces of evil of their nations represented by their gods (eg. Ezk. 28:11-19 and Dan. 10.) Their will was administered by human agents.

Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. II, p. 718-719. [Emphasis mine]

1. Heiser maintains the understanding of the *elohim* in Psalm 82 (that the “gods” are earthly judges) undermines Jesus’ claim to deity and ignores how the quotation is bookended with two suggestions of Jesus’ deity (John 10:34-35): (1) identification with the Father (John 10:30) who is Lord of the council, and (2) the assertion that the Father is in Jesus (John 10:38). Interpretation of the quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10 must not ignore the original divine – not human – context of the Psalm. That context is part of the power of the quotation – that the Jewish Scripture bore witness to nonhuman sons of God. See Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, footnote #3, p. 268.
 - a. The point in John 10:34-35 is that Jesus employs Psalm 82 in affirming that there are lesser gods, but He is “the Son of God,” verse 36.
2. Two additional points
 - a. When were Israelite judges ever given control over the nations of the world? God must judge the nations. (Vs. 8).
 - b. If the *elohim* are only human judges, why then is the judgment of “you will die like men” (vs. 7) of significance? If they are only men, they would naturally die anyway. The earthly judge interpretation makes no sense.

3. Lecture #1 noted an emphasis among some evangelical scholars with good intentions to demythologize the Scripture on some points. The human judge interpretation of Psalm 82 is a case in point.

III. Nonetheless, biblical writers were not polytheists. The “gods” mentioned are lesser *elohim*.

A. Biblical writers consistently assign unique qualities to Yahweh.

1. He is all-powerful – Jer. 32:17,27; Ps. 72:18; 115:3.

a. Jeremiah 32:17, 27

“¹⁷ Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.”

“²⁷ Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?”

b. He is the Sovereign King over the other *elohim* – Ps. 95:3; Dan. 4:35; I Kings 22:19

1. Psalm 95:3


“³ For the Lord is a great God
And a great King above all gods.” (Elohim)

B. The host of heaven are clearly subservient.

1. The members of the host council offer worship to God alone – Ps. 148:1-5; Neh. 9:6; Job 38:7; Deut. 4:19-20; 29:25-26; 32:17; James 1:17.

a. Deuteronomy 4:19-20

“¹⁹ And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. ²⁰ But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today.”




b. Job 38:7

“⁷ When the morning stars sang together

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

2. Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique. There is only one Yahweh.



a. Nehemiah 9:6

“⁶ You alone are the Lord.

You have made the heavens,

The heaven of heavens with all their host,

The earth and all that is on it,

The seas and all that is in them.

You give life to all of them

And the heavenly host bows down before You.”

IV. Psalm 89

A. A companion text to Psalm 82 is this Psalm.




1. Psalm 89:5-7

⁵ The heavens will praise Your wonders, O Lord [*Yahweh*];
Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones.

⁶ For who in the skies is comparable to the Lord [*Yahweh*]?
Who among the sons of the mighty [*elohim*] is like the Lord,

⁷ A God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones,
And awesome above all those who are around Him?


B. Observations



1. “Who among the sons” (verse 6) NASU footnotes “sons of God”.

a. ESV – “who among the heavenly beings”

b. Septuagint “...and who shall be likened to the Lord among the sons of God”



while the NASU translates as “Holy Ones.”

2. The Septuagint translates “Saints” in verse 5 and 7, while the NASU translates
“Holy Ones.”

3. Harman comments, “The phrase ‘heavenly beings’ [or ‘sons’] is literally ‘sons of God’, an expression used also in Psalm 29:1 (NIV ‘Mighty Ones’) of the angelic host. ... The council of the holy ones seems to equate with a ‘congregation of holy ones’ in verse 5.” Allan Harman, *A Mentor Commentary, Psalms*, Vol. II. P. 658. (A Reformed commentary series.)

a. Psalm 29:1

“¹ Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty,
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.”

4. This divine assembly is located in heaven and not on earth.

a. The Hebrew term “Qedoshim” is used twice in these verses [5 and 7].” Some English translations have “saints,” but this is misleading.” Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, p. 257, Footnote #3. Van Gemeren adds, “The rule of God is unquestioned by ‘the Holy Ones’ ... who are the heavenly beings (lit. ‘Sons of God’).” William Van Gemeren, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 576.

V. Regarding Monotheism and Lesser Gods

A. Burk Parsons, editor of *Tabletalk Magazine*, successor of Pastor R.C. Sproul

1. From *Tabletalk Magazine*, May 2022, p. 55

Moses asks, “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?” (Ex. 15:11). It would be tempting to pass over this line quickly, viewing it only as poetic language that does not ascribe any kind of real existence to other “gods.” But Scripture will not let us do that. Many biblical texts refer to gods as if they are real beings (e.g., Ps. 96:4; I Cor. 8:5; Gal. 4:9), but of course other passages indicate that these gods are but “worthless idols” and speak of the Lord as the only God (e.g., I Chron. 16:26; I Tim. 1:17). Do we have a contradiction here? We can see that the answer is no once we understand biblical monotheism. This doctrine states that there is only one eternal, self-existent God who created all things (see Ps. 96:5; Isa. 45:21), but it does not deny the existence of other supernatural beings such as angels and demons. Other “gods” mentioned in Scripture have a real existence, though not as deities but rather as demons whom human beings have, knowingly or not, regarded as gods (see Deut. 32:17; I Cor. 10:20). So Moses’ question in

Exodus 15:11 is not simply metaphorical; rather, the prophet compares God to other beings that are worshipped as gods. The expected answer to the question, of course, is “no one.” There is no one like the Lord among the gods (2 Sam. 7:22), and in fact God stands among the gods – various demons – not as their equal but above them as their Creator. He made the beings known as “gods” originally very good, but they fell and became His enemies (Gen. 1:31; Jude 6).

B. In regard to Psalm 82, note the following by Tremper Longman III in *The Expositor’s*

Bible Commentary: Psalms, Vol. 5, p. 623:

Whenever a hymn speaks of those other divine powers, whose existence is by no means denied on theoretical grounds, it can only be with reference to the One who will call their actions to judgment (Ps. 82), or in the spirit of superiority that mocks their impotence (Pss. 115:4-8; 135:15-18).

C. The Holy Council of God.

1. We are learning that God assembles and uses a heavenly holy council around His throne. They are lesser *elohim* (gods) and have their origin and sustenance owed to “God, the Most High”. He alone is the creator and sustainer. All worship is only due Him.
2. You may be asking why does God need an assembly? The short answer is – He does not need one.
3. This view is not detrimental to monotheism.
4. The next lesson will reveal the council in session!