

Chapter 2 – The Plural Form in the Word “Elohim”

While on the path of seeking for the truth about the trinity doctrine, I stopped at the Hebrew word “Elohim”, which has been translated as “God”. Christian teachers had taught me that the suffix “-im” in Hebrew means that the word is in its plural form. The word “Elohim” is therefore a word in its plural form and could be translated literally as “Gods”. One who defends the trinity doctrine finds proof in this word saying that the Eternal is more than one. On the other hand, it is impossible to tell if it is speaking of two, three, four, or fifty thousand, eight hundred twenty-three.

The first verse of the Torah has been translated into English like this,

*“In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth.”*

If we transliterate the Hebrew original text with Latin letters, we read the following,

*“bereshit barah **elohim** et ha-shamayim ve et ha-aretz.”* (Hebrew writing has no capital or lower case letters.)

So, we see that the word that has been translated as “God” is “Elohim”. Does this mean that the Torah introduces a polytheistic concept in the very first sentence of the Scriptures? Were there several Gods who created the heavens and the earth or was it only one?

The word “Elohim” is found in the Shema text that we studied in the previous chapter. There it is written that “Elohim” is “echad”, one. How are we supposed to understand this? On the one hand, the Eternal is spoken of in plural form – “Elohim” – but on the other hand it is established that this “Elohim” is one entity, or as we saw earlier, more likely one singular. Could it be that the Scriptures are saying that this “Elohim”, these “Divine Personalities”, constitute one entity? Can we find a foundation in these Scriptures for the understanding of the Eternal according to what would develop after more than 4300 years later into the Christian trinity doctrine? Could it be that this is talking about an entity of several persons in one single Divine Person?

The chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Madrid, Moshe ben Dahán, was invited to speak at a conference that was organized by the Christian charity organization, REMAR. I had the privilege of attending and listening to his speech. He spoke about the creation of the heavens, the earth, and man. One of the things that he said was that the word “Elohim” cannot be understood as speaking of several persons since the verb in that sentence is not written in the plural form. It does not say, “In the beginning **created [they]** (plural form)...” but “In the beginning **created [he]** (singular form)...”¹⁰. It is according to the verb that we can determine whether the noun that is the subject is plural or singular in form. This means that we cannot understand the text as speaking of several Gods

¹⁰ In the Hebrew text, the verbs are always either masculine singular, masculine plural, feminine singular, or feminine plural.

having created the heavens and the earth, but of only one. In the same way, we cannot say that there were several Divine Persons who spoke of creating man when it says, “Let us make man in our image...” because after this it says, “And Elohim created (in singular form) man...”

The words of the rabbi gave me much to think about and I began to question the perception that I had of the expression “Elohim” including several persons.

If we study the word “Elohim” deeper, we will notice that it is the plural form of the word “Eloha”, which means “Mighty” and comes from the Hebrew word “El”, which means “mighty”, “powerful”, “might”, “strength”. These three words, “El”, “Eloha”, and “Elohim” are used in the Scriptures as synonymous expressions referring to the Almighty. All three words have been translated “God” in the English bible translations.

The Hebrew word “El” occurs approximately 200 times in the Scriptures and refers to the Almighty practically every time. A couple of times it has the meaning “might”, see Genesis 31:29; Proverbs 3:27; Micah 2:1.

The plural form of the word “El” is “Elim”, which never refers to the Almighty but to other mighty beings, men or angels, see Exodus 15:11; Job 41:16 (v. 17 Heb.); Psalm 89:7. It is also used about the idols of the gentile nations, see Isaiah 57:5; Daniel 11:36.

The word “Eloha” occurs 56 times in the Scriptures, mainly in the book of Job. It only occurs twice in the Chumash (Pentateuch), in Deuteronomy 32:15 and 17.

As we mentioned earlier, the word “Elohim” is the plural form of “Eloha”. The word “Elohim” occurs approximately 2,600 times in the Scriptures. This word is not a personal name, but a title and an attribute that expresses power, might, and judgment. The Almighty’s personal name is written with the four Hebrew letters Yod, He, Wav, and He, which we normally write as YHWH.

The Meaning of the Word “Elohim” in Relation to the Word “El” and Creation

In Isaiah 43:10-11; 44:6; 45:5-6, 21b-22; 46:9 it says (HNV revised),

*“You (the children of Israel) are my witnesses, says HaShem, and my servant whom I have chosen; that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no **God** (“El”) formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am HaShem; and besides me there is no savior.”*

*“Thus says HaShem, the King of Yisra’el, and his Redeemer, HaShem of Hosts: I am the first, and I am the last; and besides me there is no **God** (“Elohim”).”*

*“I am HaShem, and there is none else; besides me there is no **God** (“Elohim”). I will gird you, though you have not known me; that they may know from the rising*

of the sun, and from the west, that there is none besides me: I am HaShem, and there is no one else.”

*“and there is no **God** (“Elohim”) else besides me, a just **God** (“El”) who saves; there is no one besides me. Look to me, and be you saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am **God** (“El”), and there is none else.”*

*“Remember the former things of old: for I am **God** (“El”), and there is no other **God** (“Elohim”), none like me”*

Here we see that both of these words, “Elohim” and “El”, are used in reference to the Almighty. These two words are used as synonymous in concept. This means that in the book of Isaiah, we cannot find any difference between the use of the words “Elohim” and “El”. Since in this text, the word “Elohim” is written in the plural form, and “El” in the singular, it would seem that the word “Elohim” should not be understood as referring to several gods, or an entity of several personalities in one and the same God, but as an expression for the manifold greatness of the Almighty.

The word “El” is used in the Scriptures in order to express both “divinity” and “power”. In Genesis 31:29a, it is written, according to the literal translation,

*“There is **power** (“El”) in my hand to harm you.”*

In Proverbs 3:27, it is written,

*“Don’t withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the **power** (“El”) of your hand to do it.”(HNV)*

In Micah 2:1b, it is written,

*“When the morning is light, they practice it, because it is in the **power** (“El”) of their hand.”(HNV)*

In these texts, we can see that the word “El” is used as “power” or “might”.

Since the word “El” is the root of the word “Elohim”, we can establish that the term “Elohim” has to do with power and authority.

It was Elohim who created the heavens and the earth. This also reveals to us something of the meaning of the word “Elohim”. The word “Elohim” has to do with the whole power that was used to create the heavens and the earth. It has to do with creative power.

By beholding creation, we can find out who Elohim is. In the first chapter of Shaliach Shaul’s (the Apostle Paul’s) letter to the Romans, verse 20, we read,

“For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen,

being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse.”(HNV)

Note the words “everlasting power and divinity”. This means that when the word “Elohim” is used about the Creator, it is not expressing a plurality of persons but the unending quality of his power and divinity.

We cannot claim with surety that the Creator is more than one based on the fact that the word “Elohim” is written in plural.

Furthermore, there are several Hebrew words that are used in the plural, for example “water” – “mayim” and “life” – “chayim”. This does not mean that it is speaking of several waters or several lives. This is only a form of expression. There are some similar examples of in the English language as well, for instance “pants” and “glasses”. These words are used in their plural form, but they are speaking of singular things, “one pair of pants” or “a pair of glasses”. Using these words in their plural form does not mean that there are several, but rather that they give expression for something that seems to be more than one. There are, after all, two pant legs in one pair of pants and two glasses in one pair of glasses. But, it is only talking about one object, which could be more or less complex.

This might help us get a deeper understanding about why the word “Elohim” is written in plural when it is only speaking of one Creator. The Almighty is so infinite that a word in singular form cannot express his greatness, power, and might.

When the Most High presents himself in the Scriptures with the title “Elohim” in plural, it does not necessarily mean that he is more than one, but that he reveals his complete and infinite power and divinity through that name. Furthermore, the verb is written in singular in nearly every place that this word occurs. This hints to us that there cannot be more than one person involved when the word “Elohim” is used about the Almighty.

“Elohim” Texts with the Verb in Plural Form

Practically every time in the consecrated Scriptures that the word “Elohim” is the subject of a sentence, the verb is written in singular form. This is not the case with the other words that we mentioned, not in the Hebrew or English. We say, “the pants are (*plural*) on the chair” and not “the pants is (*singular*) on the chair”. In the same way the Hebrew does not use the verb in singular form when for example “mayim” (water) or “chayim” (life), both of which are always in plural form, is the subject. In Hebrew, the predicate adjective will also conform to the subject, whether it is plural or singular. Therefore we would say in Hebrew, “the waters are good”. The waters – “ha-mayim”, are – “hem”, good – “tovim” (*plural*).

However, this is not the case when the plural word “Elohim” is used. Nearly every time the verb and the predicate adjective, if there is one, are written in singular form. This

means that it does not say, “Elohim are good”, but “Elohim is good” in singular.

There are a very few texts where the word “Elohim” is the subject and the verb is written in plural form. One example of this is in Genesis 20:13a, where if translated word for word it says this,

*“It happened, when **Elohim** caused (plural) me to wander...”*

If we translate 2 Samuel 7:23 word for word, it says,

*“And who is like **your** (singular) people, even like Yisra'el, who is one people in the earth, whom **Elohim** went (plural) to redeem to **himself** (singular) for a people, and to make **him** (singular) a name, and to do great things for you, and awesome things for **your** (singular) land, before **your** (singular) people, whom **you** (singular) redeem to **you** (singular) out of Mitzrayim (Egypt), from the nations and their gods (“Elohim”)?”*

We see in this text that when the Most High is mentioned, the singular form of the pronoun, *you*, *him*, and *yours*, as well as the singular form of the verb *you redeem*, are used. Why is the verb “went” – “halchoo” – written in plural form when all the other references to the Most High are written in singular form?

The answer that the rabbis give concerning these types of texts is that the word “Elohim”, in these passages, is not referring to the Almighty but to his angels who are sent out to fulfill his purposes.

There is an example of this in Genesis 35:7, where it is written,

*“He built an altar there, and called the place El-Beit-El; because there **God** (“Elohim”) **was revealed** (plural) to him, when he fled from the face of his brother.”(HNV)*

Since the verb is written in plural here, the word “Elohim” ought to be understood as referring to the angels. We know that it was angels that were revealed to him on the ladder when he fled from his brother.

The Word “Elohim” Can Refer to Angels

If we compare two passages in the Psalms with the Greek translation in the Septuagint and in the letter to the Hebrews, we see that the word “Elohim” has been translated to “angeloi” – angels.

The HNV has translated Psalm 8:5 like this,

*“For you have made him a little lower than **God** (“Elohim”), and crowned him*

with glory and honor.”

In King James Version it says,

*“For thou hast made him a little lower than the **angels** (“Elohim”), and hast crowned him with glory and honor.”*

In the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible it says,

*“For You have made him lack a little from **God** (“Elohim”); and have crowned him with glory and honor.”*

In Hebrews 2:7a, there is a quote of this passage from the Psalms,

*“You made him a little lower than the **angels** (“angelous”)”(HNV)*

We can see that the Hebrew word “Elohim”, found in Psalm 8:5, has been translated into Greek as “angels”.

There is another example of this in Psalm 97:7b, where it is written,

*“All **authorities** (“Elohim”), Show him honor!”*

Let us compare this with the quote in Hebrews 1:6b, where the HNV has translated the Greek translation in the following way,

*“Let all the **angels of God** worship him.”*

Thus we see that the word “Elohim” can be referring to heavenly messengers, in Hebrew called “malachim”. In the English, we use a word borrowed from the Greek, “angels”.

The Word “Elohim” Can Refer to Idols

Even when the Scriptures are speaking of other gods, the word “Elohim” is used. In Exodus 12:12, there is an example of this. It says,

*“For I will go through the land of Egypt in that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and animal. Against all the **gods** (“Elohim”) of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.”(HNV)*

There is a similar passage in Numbers 33:4, where the word “Elohim” is once again used in reference to the gods of Mitzrayim, compare with Genesis 31:30.

Exodus 20:3 says,

*“Have no other **gods** before me.”(Own translation)*

The word that is translated to “gods” is the Hebrew word “Elohim”.

So we see that the expression "Elohim" can refer to several idols. However, this term "Elohim" is not only used in reference to several idols, but also to just one idol, as it is written in Judges 11:24,

*"Won't you possess that which Kemosh your **god** ("Elohim") gives you to possess? So whoever the LORD our **God** ("Elohim") has dispossessed from before us, them will we possess."(HNV)*

In 1 Samuel 5:7, it is written,

*"When the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, The ark of the **God** ("Elohim") of Yisra'el shall not abide with us; for his hand is sore on us, and on Dagon our **god** ("Elohim")."(HNV)*

In 1 Kings 18:24-27, it is written,

*"You call on the name of your **god** ("Elohim"), and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the **god** ("Elohim") who answers by fire, let him be **God** ("Elohim").' All the people answered, 'It is well said.' Elijah said to the prophets of Ba`al, 'Choose one bull for yourselves, and dress it first; for you are many; and call on the name of your **god** ("Elohim"), but put no fire under it. They took the bull which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Ba`al from morning even until noon, saying, Ba`al, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any who answered. They leaped about the altar which was made. It happened at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, 'Cry aloud; for he is a **god** ("Elohim"): either he is musing, or he is gone aside, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleeps and must be awakened.'"(HNV)*

In 1 Kings 11:5, the term "Elohim" is used about a pagan goddess, as it is written,

*"For Shlomo went after `Ashoret the **goddess** ("Elohim") of the Tzidonim, and after Milkom the abomination of the `Ammonim."(HNV)*

The Word “Elohim” Can Refer to a Man

There are two very interesting texts in the Torah in relation to the word “Elohim”. The first one is in Exodus 4:16, which we could translate word for word like this,

“On your behalf, he shall speak to the people, and it shall come to pass. He shall be mouth for you and you shall be Elohim for him.”

The second passage is in Exodus 7:1. It could be translated word for word like this,

“And HaShem said to Moshe, ‘See I have made you to be Elohim for Paroh and Aharon, your brother, shall be your prophet.’”

In these texts we see that the Almighty is delegating his power to a man, Moshe, and is calling him “Elohim”. This has been translated in the English Bible as “God”.

It is interesting to note in this passage that the plural form “Elohim” is used about one single man who represents the Almighty on the earth. If the term “Elohim” could only be used to express plurality, which is the case when referring to angels and idols, it would not be possible to use it in reference to one single man, as has been done in these texts. Moshe is not more than one person. Here as he is given the power to represent the Almighty on the earth he is not called by one of the singular forms of the word, “El” or “Eloha”, but by the plural form “Elohim”.

This constitutes strong proof for the fact that when the word “Elohim” is used in reference to the Almighty, it does not necessarily include more than one person, but it has to do with exceptional power.

Thus we see that the term “Elohim” is used to describe one single person who has received the power to act on behalf of the Almighty.

The Word “Elohim” Can Refer to Judges and Kings

In the Bible we find yet another meaning of the word “Elohim”.

In Exodus 22:8-9 (7-8 Heb.), it is written,

*“If the thief isn’t found, then the master of the house shall come near to **God**, to find out if he hasn’t put his hand to his neighbor’s goods. For every matter of trespass, whether it be for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any kind of lost thing, whereof one says, ‘This is mine,’ the cause of both parties shall come before **God**. He whom **God** condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.”(HNV)*

The word “Elohim”, which has been translated here as “God”, has in many bible translation been translated as “the judges”. This means that there is yet another meaning of the word “Elohim” – “judges”, compare with Exodus 21:6.

In Psalm 82:1-2, it is written,

*“A Psalm of Asaph. **God** (“Elohim”) standeth in the congregation of **God** (“El”); in the midst of the **gods** (“Elohim”) He judges: ‘How long will ye judge unjustly, and respect the persons of the wicked?’ Selah”(JPS¹³ revised)*

¹³ Jewish Publication Society Bible

In this passage we can see how the word “Elohim” is used with two different meanings. The first time it is referring to the Almighty, and the second time to the judges, or possibly the kings, who are ultimately responsible for justice in the earth.

In verses 6-7, it is written,

*“I have said, ‘You are **gods** (“Elohim”), all of you are **sons of the Most High**. Nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like one of the rulers.”*(HNV revised)

Yeshua quotes this text in John 10:34-36,

*“Yeshua answered them, ‘Isn’t it written in your law, “I said, you are **gods**?” If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture can’t be broken), Do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You blaspheme,” because I said, “**I am the Son of God**?”’”*(HNV)

From these texts we can bring out two truths that are very interesting to us in this context.

First of all we see that the term “Elohim”, which is translated as “gods”, can mean people who have received the word of the Almighty. Who are these that have received the Eternal’s word? They are the Jewish people, see Romans 3:1-2. According to the context in Psalm 82, we can see that this is primarily speaking of those who have been put in positions of authority over others, such as judges, kings, and other rulers. Some texts in the Torah show that the Eternal’s Word was given primarily to the judges in Israel, see Exodus 22:8; Deuteronomy 17:18-20.

Secondly we see that those who have been named “Elohim” are also called “the sons of the Most High”. The term “Son of God” can therefore also refer to a king or judge who has received power from the Most High to rule, reign and carry out his judgments on the earth, as it is written in 1 Chronicles 28:6,

*“He said to me, Shlomo your son, he shall build my house and my courts; for I have **chosen him to be my son**, and I will be his father.”*(HNV)

Conclusion

The concept “Elohim” has to do with power and might and it is not solely a reference to the Almighty but could also refer to heavenly messengers, idols, a man who has received authority from the Almighty, and judges who have been placed in the place of the Most High to judge on the earth.

When the plural term “Elohim” is used of the Almighty, this does not mean that it is referring to more than one person, but rather to an infinite possession and an infinite

presence of power and might.

The fact that the word “Elohim” is used synonymously with “El” on the one hand, and on the other hand is used in reference to one single person, proves that it ought not always to be understood as a plurality of persons. Furthermore, when the verb that follows is written in singular, there is no proof whatsoever that it is referring to more than one person.

When the term “Elohim” is used in reference to angels, idols, or judges, the verb is written in plural form. This is not the case when it is referring to the Almighty or one of the false gods. In the few cases where the verb is written in plural, the subject “Elohim” ought not to be understood as a plural god but rather as speaking of angelic activity.