

Title: Psalm 82 – Gods or Frauds? (Original Long Version)

Course: Exegetical Methods (Old Testament)

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Programme: MCM, 2021

Word Count: 3858 words

Date of Submission: 05 Oct 2021

DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

Introduction – Gods or men?

At first glance, Psalm 82 might not seem particularly noteworthy as just one of many passages in the Bible that speak about God as ruler and judge, a heavenly council and other ‘gods’. However, extra attention has been drawn to this psalm because Jesus cites it in John 10:34 – spurring much interpretative debate over the identity of these ‘gods’. Are they really supernatural beings? Or merely humans like the Jewish opponents that Jesus was addressing?

In this essay, I will argue decisively that many important clues point us to the supernatural interpretation.

Historical & Literary Context – A cry of the exiles

The superscript of several Psalms attribute them to Asaph – most likely the Levite musician appointed by David (1 Chron 6:31,39 & 16:7) who would have lived during the 10th-century B.C. in pre-exilic times. On the other hand, attribution to Asaph can also mean anyone from his household¹. Hence, exilic or post-exilic² composition dates are also possible such as circa 500 B.C.³

These Psalms of Asaph are numbered 50 & 73-83 (Masoretic Text) or 49 & 72-82 (Septuagint) – for the purposes of this essay, the Masoretic Text numbering is used. The whole block of Psalms 50 & 73-83 carries the general theme of current wickedness and injustice prevailing – especially how the people of Israel are suffering under the power of foreigners – but also that YHWH is ultimately in control and will one day judge and punish evildoers. Within this corpus, Psalm 82’s message fits in nicely.

Several direct references also point to the exilic or post-exilic setting of the passages, such as the Temple being destroyed (Psa 74:2-8, 79:1). Hence, this is the most likely composition date of Psalm 82 and can also inform the exegesis of the passage.

Textual Analysis – Elohim amidst elohim

Psalm 82 is written in narrative prose: “a form of writing in which the work is written in prose, rather than in poetry, and tells a definite story through actions.”⁴ As my essay shall argue, it is a description of an actual event rather than a poem that employs purely figurative language to teach a moral lesson.

It is commonly recognized that this Psalm follows an chiastic structure, although the exact chiasmus that is proposed differs. I propose a structure as follows (ESV):

¹ Holman Bible Editorial, *Holman Concise Bible Dictionary*, (TN/USA: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2011), Asaph.

² Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature” (Ph.D Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 10. Available at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=fac_dis

³ Julian Morgensten, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 14 (1939): 121, here 93. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23503153>

⁴ G. Wiesen, “What Is Narrative Prose?,” *InfoBloom* (accessed 01-Sep-2021): <https://www.infobloom.com/what-is-narrative-prose.htm>

- A) ¹God has taken his place in the divine council;
 B) in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
 C) ²“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
 D) ³Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
 D) ⁴Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
 C) ⁵They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
 B) ⁶I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; ⁷nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”
 A) ⁸Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!

The parallel structures can be described in this manner:

- A) – God’s rightful place over His dominion (as I shall demonstrate later, the divine council and the nations are linked concepts).
 B) – The gods are judged.
 C) – The criminal charges are laid out.
 D) – The correct course of action that should have been taken, as a contrast.

Notably, verse 1 literally says: ***elohim stands in the congregation of el midst elohim.*** Because the first occurrence of *elohim* is paired with a singular verb⁵, it should be translated as ‘God’ (that is, YHWH). The second occurrence of *elohim* must be plural ‘gods’ because (by definition) you can’t be in the midst of just one individual. Hence the verse is speaking about God standing in the congregation among many ‘gods’.⁶

For many Christians (and Jews) raised on strict monotheism⁷ (i.e. there is only one god that actually exists – the God of the Bible), this realization can be jarring and force them to down one of two routes⁸. On the one hand, they can maintain their existing presuppositions by rationalizing the Psalm’s words as poetic non-literalism referring to mere humans. On the other hand, they can understand and accept the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) supernaturalist worldview that the Old Testament operates upon.

Exegesis – Four layers of context

The overall thrust of Psalm 82 is quite straightforward – God the Most High presides over a meeting in which He first criticizes, then pronounces punishment on the accused for their wrongdoings. However, the main point of disagreement over the interpretation of this passage is over the identity of those being criticized by YHWH.

⁵ Michael S. Heiser, “What About Genesis 1:26-27 (let US make mankind in OUR image)? Did “gods” create humankind? Does Elohim, since it is structurally plural in Hebrew, always MEAN “gods” (plural)?” *SITCHIN IS WRONG.COM*, 2. Available at: <http://sitchiniswrong.com/Elohim.pdf>

⁶ Michael S. Heiser, “Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82 Be Understood as Men or Divine Beings?” *Annual Meeting, Evangelical Theological Society (2010)*, 1. Available at: <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETS2010Psalm82.pdf>

⁷ Theodorus P. van Baaren, “Monotheism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (accessed 06-Sep-2021): <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monotheism>

⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 11-13.

Who are these gods, sons of the Most High? Are they merely humans or something else – something supernatural? Using four layers of context, I will argue for the latter interpretation and contrast why it is more cohesive than the competing view.

Exegesis layer 1 – Die like usual?

The first layer is the Psalm itself, where in v6 God lays out the complaint against these gods, and in v7 God doles out a punishment – the accused will die like men and fall like any ruler. If the accused are heavenly beings, then the punishment of human mortality makes sense – what worse fate for an immortal being than to lose eternity?

Whereas if these really are just human rulers, then this sentencing is highly redundant and describes what would naturally happen to them anyway: “This sounds as awkward as sentencing a child to grow up, or a dog to bark.”⁹ Not much of a punishment!

Exegesis layer 2 – Sons by the tons

The second layer is the wider Old Testament, where similar scenes demonstrate a clearly supernatural setting. Similar to Psalm 82’s Sons of the Most High [*bene elyon*] gathering in the Council of God, in Job 1:6 & 2:1 we have Sons of God [*bene elohim*] present themselves before YHWH – and if that isn’t clearly supernatural enough, *ha-satan* shows up to make his challenges. In Job 38:4-7 *bene elohim* were witnessing the creation of the earth, which fully rules out the idea that they are human. Psalm 89:5-7 (a text that parallels the Baal Cycle¹⁰, a notion that will be very important in the next layer) describes an assembly of Sons of the Mighty [*bene elim*] and furthermore places them in the skies: “There is no reference in Scripture to a council of human beings serving Yahweh in the skies (Jews or otherwise).”¹¹

Various other passages also describe councils staffed by clearly supernatural beings, although they are not referred to specifically as ‘sons’. In 1 Kings 22:19-23 they are called the host of heaven and include a spirit. Daniel 4 uses the terms watchers (Aramaic *iyrin*) for the beings that come down from heaven with a joint decree by themselves (v17) and the Most High (v24). It is also noteworthy that this Aramaic term from Daniel 4 is used in the pseudepigraphical 1 Enoch for angels¹² and is equivalent to the term used for Babylonian *apkallu* figurines¹³. Hence the non-human view of Psalm 82 fits in well the wider Old Testament corpus.

There are also other passages that speak about punishment of heavenly beings (Exo 12:12, Isa 24:21-23 with them in the heavens again, Jer 46:25). One particular example even speaks of them suffering in terms usually reserved for mortal beings: *For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over*

⁹ Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2008), 17.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1276&context=lts_fac_pubs

¹⁰ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 152.

¹¹ Michael S. Heiser, “Who Are the Elohim? The Answer Might Rattle Your Theology,” *Logos.com* (accessed 13-Aug-2021): <https://blog.logos.com/who-are-elohim/>

¹² Alexandria Frisch, *The Danielic Discourse on Empire in Second Temple Literature (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism)*, (N/p.: Brill, 2016), 60, footnote 29.

¹³ Amar Annus, “On the Origin of Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions,” *Journal for the study of the Pseudepigrapha* (2010): 283. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/4570714/On_the_Origin_of_Watchers_A_Comparative_Study_of_the_Antediluvian_Wisdom_in_Mesopotamian_and_Jewish_Traditions

for slaughter. ... All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. – Isaiah 34:2-4 (ESV).

By comparison, never in recorded history has YHWH ever stood in council surrounded by mortal humans. The general response to encountering YHWH's real presence in the Old Testament is expecting to die soon after (Gen 32:30, Exo 33:20, Judg 6:22-23 & 13:22-23). If Psalm 82's gods are human beings, then the sentencing of v7 is unnecessary – since they would already have dropped dead like Uzzah who touched the ark of God (2 Sam 6:6-7)!

Proponents of the human rulers/judges interpretation of Psalm 82 usually appeal to passages such as Exodus 21:6, 22:8-9 & 22:28 and 1 Samuel 2:25 where *elohim* is rendered 'judges' in some translations¹⁴ – in each case however, translating *elohim* as 'God' fits the context equally well or better.¹⁵

Exegesis layer 3 – Divine 'diss track'

The third layer is the surrounding ANE religious milieu – in particular, the Ugarit kingdom which was located in northern Syria and lasted for several centuries up until about 1200 B.C.¹⁶. This places it in close geographical and temporal proximity to the Israelite kingdom and religion. The Ugaritic Baal Cycle (found on tablets dating from around the end of the 13th-century B.C., but possibly reflecting an older tradition¹⁷) contains many parallels to Old Testament concepts and passages. Relevant to this essay is the Baal Cycle's version of the divine council, where El (the father and supreme deity) together with his son Baal (as co-regent) preside over an assembly of other deities.

In his dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy (Hebrew and Semitic Studies), Michael Heiser collated much peer-reviewed research that points to the following observations: "it is the consensus of scholars that the Ugaritic (and larger Canaanite) council was the conceptual precursor to the Israelite version of the divine council"¹⁸ and "the most explicit references to a divine assembly in the Hebrew Bible are found in late canonical texts such as Psalm 82, Job 1 and 2, and Zech 3:1-7. These texts, dating to the exile or afterward, are also regarded as the most transparent parallels to the Ugaritic council."¹⁹

With El & Baal at the head of the council, the rest of the gathering comprises divine family members – a striking parallel to Psalm 82's *bene elyon*: "The overall structure and operation of the Israelite divine council become clearer once the second tier of the council of Ugarit and the vice-regency of Baal are adequately understood. ... the top two tiers of the divine council at Ugarit should be understood in terms of a divine family. At the top tier are the divine parents, followed in descending order by their children, "the seventy sons of Athirat," who are the leading member gods of the council."²⁰ Furthermore: "With respect to the Israelite divine council, the connection of the vocabulary of royalty to the sons of God along with its associated "sphere sovereignty" is a significant correspondence to the Ugaritic council hierarchy."²¹

¹⁴ TurretinFan, "Die Like Men? A Response to Dr. Michael Heiser," *Alpha & Omega Ministries* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/exegesis/die-like-men-a-response-to-dr-michael-heiser/>

¹⁵ Heiser, *Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82*, 7-11.

¹⁶ Claude Frédéric Armand, "Ugarit," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (accessed 02-Sep-2021): <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ugarit>

¹⁷ Aaron Tugendhaft, *Baal and the Politics of Poetry (The Ancient Word)* (Routledge, 2018) Perlego Edition, Chapter 2.

¹⁸ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 7.

¹⁹ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 10.

²⁰ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 44.

²¹ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 48.

Psalm 82 also contains parallels to another neighbouring religious system, that of the Mesopotamians²². In the myth of the elevation of Inanna (possibly dating from 2nd to 3rd millennium B.C.), the gods address An (the supreme god and personification of the skies) as follows: “What thou has ordered (comes) true! The utterance of prince and lord is (but) what thou hast ordered, dost agree with. O An! thy great command takes precedence, who could gainsay it? O father of the gods, thy command, **the very foundations of heaven and earth**, what god could spurn it?”²³ By contrast, Psalm 82 instead portrays the true father of *bene elyon* lambasting their unjust commands which shake **all the foundations of the earth** (v5).

Whereas the Ugaritic model has El & Baal as co-regents, in the Israelite religion there is no *elohim* besides YHWH (Exo 15:11, Isa 44:6-8 & 45:5-6). Hence both the positions are occupied by YHWH – **the regent is YHWH, and the co-regent is also YHWH** – the so-called Two Powers in Heaven²⁴ doctrine held by many Jews across and after the Second Temple period²⁵, as derived from passages such as Genesis 19:24²⁶, Daniel 7²⁷ (yet another Biblical parallel to the Baal Cycle²⁸) and various Angel of YHWH passages²⁹. “From an early stage, Israel adapted the role of a vice-regent in the divine council so that it was allowable in a monolatrous context and did not violate the Shema. At Ugarit, though El was the ultimate sovereign, El and Baal exercised rule over all the other gods of the council. ... In official Yahwism, on the other hand, the vice-regent position could not be held by Baal. Rather than allow Baal a position in the council—even under Yahweh’s authority—Israelite prophets and scribes appropriated Baal’s epithets and authority for Yahweh himself. The vice-regent in Israelite religion was a divine being considered an extension of Yahweh himself. That is, the vice-regent is Yahweh’s hypostasis.”³⁰ (This is a very important point I will return to in the next and final layer of context.)

This is not to concede that the Israelite religion simply borrowed or evolved from the polytheistic roots of pagan ANE cultures. Instead, Psalm 82’s adaptation of the El-Baal divine council can be viewed as a form of polemical co-opting and appropriation: “This reference to Canaanite literature, in particular the meeting of the gathered council of gods before El, is not indicative of the God of Israel being part of the Canaanite pantheon. Rather, it is employed to picture the God of Israel assaulting the pagan pantheon”³¹. This practise is frequently seen throughout the Old Testament, for example: Genesis & Exodus as ‘polemical theology’³²; Genesis 6 as a discrediting of Babylonian *apkallu*³³; the plagues on Egypt as a defeat of its pantheon³⁴; Psalm 29’s one-upmanship over Baal³⁵;

²² Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council 101: Lesson 2: The *elohim* of Psalm 82 – gods or men?” *The Divine Council.com* (accessed 25-Aug-2021): http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/Psalm_82_overview.pdf

²³ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, (CT/USA: Yale University Press, 1978), 97.

²⁴ Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (N.p.: Brill, 1977), ix, 33.

²⁴ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 54-55.

²⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (IL/USA: Crossway Books, 2013), 116-118.

²⁶ Anthony Rogers, “THE “HEAVENLY” & “EARTHLY” YAHWEH: A PROTO-TRINITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 19:24 Part I,” in *Our God is Triune: Essays in Biblical Theology*, edited by Michael R. Burgos Jr (N.p.: Church Militant Publications, 2018), 34-76.

²⁷ Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 35-36.

²⁸ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 141-154.

²⁹ Michael R. Burgos Jr, “JEWISH PROTO-TRINITARIANISM,” in *Our God is Triune: Essays in Biblical Theology* (N.p.: Church Militant Publications, 2018), 106-120.

³⁰ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 54-55.

³¹ John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (IL/USA: Crossway Books, 2013) Perlego Edition, Chapter 11.

³² Currid, *Against the Gods*, Chapters 3-10.

³³ Annus, *On the Origin of Watchers*, 280-281 & 315-316.

YHWH taking over various epithets and authority ascribed to Baal³⁶; and Elijah's ministry with its crescendo in the defeat of Baal's prophets on Mt Carmel³⁷. The New Testament also continues this practise, for example Revelation giving Jesus appellations that are used of Zeus³⁸ and Hekate³⁹.

Neither does the existence of other *elohim* imply that the Old Testament teaches polytheism or henotheism: "The Old Testament writers understood that Yahweh was an *elohim*—but no other *elohim* was Yahweh. He was species-unique among all residents of the spiritual world."⁴⁰

By contrast, if instead the correct interpretation of Psalm 82 is that mortal humans are in the 'council of *El*', then this would represent a total break with the clearly supernatural setting of the pagan divine councils: "it requires turning a blind eye to psalm's own historical and linguistic context."⁴¹ A human judges view of Psalm 82 also loses its value as polemic against pagan pantheons and other religious systems.

Exegesis layer 4 – The true Son who co-rules

Finally, I move to **the fourth and final layer** – the New Testament's "inspired interpretation of the Old Testament"⁴². In John 10:34, Jesus clearly cites Psalm 82:6's "*I said, you are gods*" (using the exact Greek words⁴³ as found in the Septuagint's rendering⁴⁴). What is less clear is whether in doing so, Jesus assumed these 'gods' are mere humans or supernatural beings.

I contend that the context of John 10 does not support the human view. In v30, Jesus makes the bold claim "*I and the Father are one*" which causes the Jews to accuse Jesus of claiming divinity. The human view would entail Jesus attempting de-escalation in v34 by essentially saying: "I have every right to call myself divine—you guys can do it as well on the basis of Psalm 82:6 ... you mere mortals can call yourself gods, so I can, too"⁴⁵. However, it then becomes jarring and schizophrenic when in v38, Jesus re-escalates by declaring "*the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*"

Whereas if Jesus takes the supernatural view, then v34 is an appeal to the Old Testament's depictions of *elohim* other than YHWH – if those exist, why so surprised if The Son is an *elohim* too? Furthermore, vv30-34-38 become a powerful declaration of Jesus' status as not just any run-of-the-mill *elohim* – but as the very Most High, YHWH Himself: "Because he calls himself the son of God and has in fact just claimed to be one with Yahweh, not only puts himself in the class of the sons of

³⁴ Ziony Zevit, "Exodus in the Bible and the Egyptian Plagues," *Biblical Archaeology Society* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/exodus/exodus-in-the-bible-and-the-egyptian-plagues/>

³⁵ Jed Ostoich, "Yahweh vs. Baal: The Psalms as Apologetic," *Discovery Series* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://discoveryseries.org/courses/yahweh-vs-baal-the-psalms-as-apologetic/>

³⁶ James S. Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal* (Edinburgh/UK: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018), 63-97.

³⁷ Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal*, 68-70.

³⁸ Michael S. Heiser, "Naked Bible 353: Revelation 1:4," *The Naked Bible Podcast* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-353-revelation-14/> [pp.5-7 of transcript]

³⁹ Michael S. Heiser, "Naked Bible 363: Revelation 3 Part 2," *The Naked Bible Podcast* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-363-revelation-3-part-2/> [pp.12-13 of transcript]

⁴⁰ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 30-32.

⁴¹ Heiser, *Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82*, 7.

⁴² Michael S. Heiser, *Twitter* (accessed 17-Aug-2021): <https://mobile.twitter.com/DRMSHPhD/status/1380973864868487168>

⁴³ Bible Hub, "Interlinear John 10:34" (accessed 13-Aug-2021): <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/john/10-34.htm>

⁴⁴ Study Bible, "Interlinear Psalm 82:6" (accessed 13-Aug-2021):

<https://studybible.info/interlinear/Psalms%2082:6>

⁴⁵ Heiser, *Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82*, 12.

the Most High of Psalm 82:6—divine אלהים—but implies that he is Lord of the council. This particular son of the Most High is one with the Father.”⁴⁶

Recall that in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle, the heads of the divine council comprise El & Baal as co-regents. In the monotheistic Israelite religion, these positions are held by YHWH and *also* YHWH (the aforementioned Two Powers in Heaven). Jesus now brings the divine council of Psalm 82 into the discussion with the Jews and essentially reiterates that the co-regents of the council are The Father and The Son – YHWH and *also* YHWH. Jesus is the fulfilment of Psalm 82:8 – He is God incarnate who will judge all (John 5:22&27, Acts 10:42 & 17:31), yet also the Son who inherits the nations (Psalm 2:7-9). No wonder the Jews get so upset!

The Co-regents Presiding Over the Divine Council		
Ugaritic Baal Cycle	Old Testament	New Testament
El & Baal (father & son)	YHWH & <i>also</i> YHWH (Two Powers in Heaven)	The Father & Jesus the Son (YHWH & <i>also</i> YHWH)

Exegesis overall – The supernatural exegesis is the most natural one

Now it’s been firmly established that Psalm 82’s *elohim* and *bene elyon* refer to supernatural beings, an exegesis of the overall passage can be made. YHWH the Most High is holding a council session (v1) to condemn them for wrongdoings (vv2-5) and pronounce the sentence of de-divinization (vv6-7), ending with the declaration that God shall judge the earth and inherit the nations (v8).

Psalm 82 is a polemic against the rival religions of the ANE with their pantheons – not only are they all subordinate to YHWH, they are stripped of their *elohim* ontology⁴⁷. If the dating of Psalm 82’s composition is exilic or post-exilic, then the passage can also be understood as an answer to the theological question of how Jerusalem and its Temple could be destroyed. It is not that almighty YHWH – God over all the earth – had been defeated by some foreign god (2 Kings 18:33-35). No, the Most High would judge this and all other transgressions committed by His failed sons who sit in the council!

What exactly are the wrongdoings that were committed, however? One suggestion is the Genesis 6:1-4 event where *bene elohim* forsook their heavenly abode and produced forbidden offspring with daughters of men. This view nicely explains the shock expressed in v6 and the poetic punishment in v7 – if *elohim* wish to indulge themselves with earthly mortals, then perish like earthly mortals!⁴⁸

Another proposal is Deuteronomy 32:8-9⁴⁹ which reads: *When elyon gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of bene elohim. But YHWH's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.* (The Dead Sea Scrolls has this *bene elohim* variant, which corroborates the Septuagint that has ‘sons of God’ or ‘angels of God’ variants⁵⁰.) This parallels the sequence of Genesis 11-12 where humanity is divided at Babel, followed by Abraham’s calling. A clue that these passages are linked is Psalm 82:8’s ‘inherit’ [*root word nachal*] which is also used in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (inheritance, heritage).⁵¹

⁴⁶ Heiser, *Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82*, 13-14.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal*, 2, 40.

⁴⁸ Morgensten, *The Mythological Background of Psalm 82*, 114-118, here 86-90.

⁴⁹ Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 75-81.

⁵⁰ Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *LBT Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2001), 52. Available at:

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1278&context=lts_fac_pubs

⁵¹ Heiser, *Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82*, 4-5.

In this view, Psalm 82 explains that the human nations are corrupt because of mismanagement by *bene elyon* (vv2-5). This results in YHWH deciding to strip them of their position and take matters into His own hands (vv6-8). Whereas formerly only Jacob was YHWH's *nachal* (Deut 32:9), soon all the nations will be YHWH's *nachal* (Psalm 82:8) as in the Messianic promise given to Abraham (Gen 22:18). The concept that the council of gods is linked to human rulers is also found in Mesopotamian beliefs⁵² which lends further polemic power to Psalm 82.

Personally, I support the Deuteronomy 32:8-9 link to Psalm 82 for reasons I will elaborate upon in the next section. This chain of events stemming from the supernatural view of Psalm 82 now leads me to a holistic and enlightening humanistic application.

Humanistic Reading & Conclusion

Proponents of the human rulers/judges interpretation of Psalm 82 apply it for the believer today with the hermeneutic that no matter what injustices are being carried out by political leaders or powerful people, God holds the ultimate authority to judge and recompense them for their wrongs.⁵³

I propose that the supernatural beings view of Psalm 82 does not lose out in this regard – proponents can also apply the same hermeneutic (for example, see John Piper in 1994⁵⁴ and 2020⁵⁵). This is because the Old Testament links together human kingdoms with spiritual powers⁵⁶ (e.g. Exo 12:12, Isa 24:21-23 & 34:2, Jer 46:25, Dan 10:13&20). The corrupt heavenly powers misruling the world will not go unpunished – in fact, their time has already been waning with the arrival of Jesus Christ. When they are fully destroyed, their influence over human nations will disappear as God Himself takes back the earth.

The supernatural interpretation that refers back to Deuteronomy 32:8-9 has additional applications for Christian believers today. It provides us with the Old Testament basis for many New Testament concepts that even casual churchgoers will have heard of – adoption as Sons and Daughters of God (John 1:12, Rom 8:17, 2 Cor 6:18, Gal 4:7); believers one day will be over the nations (1 Cor 6:2, Rev 2:26-27 & 20:4) and even judging angels (1 Cor 6:3); Paul's usage of "*geographical domain rulership*"⁵⁷ terms like powers and principalities (Eph 6:12 and many more); spiritual rebels knowing about an impending punishment linked to the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:23-24, Matt 8:28-29, Luke 8:26-29 which uses the term 'the Most High God', Luke 10:1-24 & 11:20).⁵⁸

The supernatural interpretation of Psalm 82 also provides innovative new approaches for apologetics, evangelism and polemics in this age of religious plurality and scepticism. It provides coherent responses to modern paganism⁵⁹, Mormon theology⁶⁰, evolutionary monotheism⁶¹, and even

⁵² Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 97-98.

⁵³ Robert L. Deffinbaugh, "7. Psalm 82: The Judgment of the 'Gods' – Conclusion," Bible.org (accessed 01-Sep-2021): <https://bible.org/seriespage/7-psalm-82-judgment-gods>

⁵⁴ John Piper, "Putting the Gods in Their Place," Desiring God (accessed 27-Aug-2021): <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/putting-the-gods-in-their-place>

⁵⁵ John Piper, "Did Jesus Say We Are gods?" Desiring God (accessed 27-Aug-2021): <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-jesus-say-we-are-gods>

⁵⁶ Gerald R. McDermott, *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church* (UK: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 64.

⁵⁷ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 121-123.

⁵⁸ I provide a brief overview in my 2021 essay submitted to Rev. Dr. Tan Jin Huat: "Discuss the significance of a high Christology in Paul's letter to the Colossians in the light of its purpose." For a thorough treatment, see the major influential work: Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*.

⁵⁹ Hercules Invictus and Michael S. Heiser, "Voice of Olympus", BlogTalkRadio (accessed 02-Sep-2021): <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/surn/2017/01/31/voice-of-olympus> [1:11:21 to 1:22:24, 1:24:47 to 1:26:46]

⁶⁰ Michael S. Heiser, "You've Seen one Elohim, You've Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism's Use of Psalm 82," *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 221-266.

spiritual warfare which is more than just “yelling commands in the name of Jesus at a demon (or, more frequently, into the air).”⁶² It is not challenged or contradicted by the existence of other religions – instead, these correspond⁶³ exactly to YHWH dividing the post-Babel nations among *bene elohim* (Deut 32:8, Acts 17:26-27). However, YHWH has judged them of misrule (Psa 82:2-7) and replaced the system with belief in Jesus Christ who is YHWH embodied (Psa 82:8, Acts 17:30-31).

Rather than the head-on confrontation of flatly denying that other ‘gods’ even exist, evangelists can re-cast them as a part of the Bible’s fuller picture: “... if you're widening this out to a world religions question, if we believe in a spiritual world - again, we have these multiple entities ... Only the Biblical description actually makes sense of all this. It affirms one creator deity, not only just the creator of the physical world but the creator of the spiritual world and everything in it.”⁶⁴

So Psalm 82 really is speaking about supernatural gods – but also condemns them as frauds who lead the world astray. With this interpretation and corresponding worldview in mind, we’re now ready to take back the whole earth for God as ministers of the Gospel.

The Co-regents Presiding Over the Divine Council		
Ugaritic Baal Cycle	El & Baal (father & son)	“At Ugarit, though El was the ultimate sovereign, El and Baal exercised rule over all the other gods of the council.” ^A
Old Testament	YHWH & <i>also</i> YHWH (Two Powers in Heaven)	“From an early stage, Israel adapted the role of a vice-regent in the divine council so that it was allowable in a monolatrous context and did not violate the Shema. ... The vice-regent in Israelite religion was a divine being considered an extension of Yahweh himself. That is, the vice-regent is Yahweh’s hypostasis.” ^A
New Testament	The Father & Jesus the Son (YHWH & <i>also</i> YHWH)	“Because he calls himself the son of God and has in fact just claimed to be one with Yahweh, not only puts himself in the class of the sons of the Most High of Psalm 82:6—divine אלהים—but implies that he is Lord of the council. This particular son of the Most High is one with the Father.” ^B

^A Michael S. Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature” (Ph.D Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 10. Available at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1092&context=fac_dis

^B Michael S. Heiser, “Should the Plural אלהים of Psalm 82 Be Understood as Men or Divine Beings?” *Annual Meeting, Evangelical Theological Society* (2010), 1. Available at: <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETS2010Psalm82.pdf>

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⁶¹ Heiser, *Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?* 1-3.

⁶² Michael S. Heiser, “What Is Spiritual Warfare? Mike’s (Brief) Take”, DR. MICHAEL S. HEISER (accessed 01-Sep-2021): <https://drms.h.com/spiritual-warfare-mikes-brief-take/> [p. 5 of PDF]

⁶³ McDermott, *God's Rivals*, 51-65.

⁶⁴ Michael S. Heiser, “Questions Aloud w/ Dr. Heiser | Who is God? Is it Allah, Buddha or Jesus?”, AWKNG TV (accessed 26-Aug-2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n-RYzSzSe0> [08:54 to 11:00]

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