

# Elohim: Plural or Singular? (Part 1)

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*In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth.*

Genesis 1:1

The Hebrew word for God is Elohim. Elohim ends with the masculine plural suffix "ִים" From this we might conclude that Elohim signifies a *numerical plural* (i.e. denoting *multiplicity*) and translate it accordingly as *gods*. But before we determine whether the world was created by a single God or multiple gods, we must consider whether Elohim is really a *numerical plural*.

In Hebrew, a numerically plural noun has three characteristics:

1. It receives a plural suffix;
2. It receives a plural verb;
3. It receives a plural adjective.
- 4.

The first characteristic, the plural suffix, is familiar to the English speaker. In English, most nouns have the plural suffix "s" or "es". For example, *dog* is the singular while *dogs* is the plural. Hebrew adds another dimension by matching adjectives and verbs to the noun. In Hebrew, a plural noun gets a plural verb and plural adjective. In contrast, English verbs and adjectives do not change to match the noun. For example, in English:

Singular: The big dog guarded.

Plural: The big dogs guarded.

But in Hebrew:

Singular: The big (sg) dog (he) guarded. הַגְּדוֹל הַכָּלֵב שָׁמַר

Plural: The big (pl) dogs (they) guarded.

הַגְּדוֹלִים יַם־הַכָּלֵב וַיִּשְׁמַר

So the first thing we must check about Elohim is whether it gets a plural adjective and plural verb, because this will tell us whether or not it is a *numerical plural* denoting *multiplicity*. In the very first verse of the Torah we read בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים meaning "Elohim (he) created". Were Elohim a *numerical plural*, the verse would have to say בָּרְאוּ אֱלֹהִים "Elohim (they) created". Indeed, the word Elohim appears in its plural form over 2000 times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in virtually every instance it has a singular verb. It is always "And Elohim (he) spoke to Moses " and never "And Elohim (they) spoke to Moses ". The same thing can be found with the adjective. The adjective for Elohim is singular, not plural. Thus we find צַדִּיק אֱלֹהִים "righteous (sg) Elohim" (Ps 7:10) and *not* צַדִּיקִים אֱלֹהִים "righteous (pl) Elohim".

So why does Elohim have a plural suffix if it is *numerically singular* with a singular verb and singular adjective? It turns out there is a special type of plural in Hebrew that has a plural suffix even though it is *numerically singular* with a singular verb and singular adjective. These nouns are called *majestic plurals*. The meaning of the plural suffix in the *majestic plural* is not that there is more than one of the noun, but that the noun is "great, absolute, or majestic". For example, אָדוֹן means "master" while אֲדוֹנִים (Isa 19:4; Mal 1:6) with the masculine plural suffix means "great master, lord". Thus we read, "I will imprison the Egyptians in the hand of a harsh lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them" (Isa 19:4). In this verse the fierce king that will enslave Egypt is described as an אֲדוֹנִים קָשָׁה "a harsh (sg) lord (pl)". In this verse, the plural suffix attached to the word אֲדוֹנִים does not make it a *numerical plural* ("masters") but instead magnifies the meaning

("great master, lord"). Because אֲדֹנָיִם is a *majestic plural* it receives the singular adjective קָשָׁה (harsh) and not the plural adjective קָשִׁים that would be required for a *numerical plural*. The word בַּעַל also means "master" while בְּעָלִים with the masculine plural suffix means "great master, owner". For example, in Exodus 21 the owner of the "goring ox" is repeatedly referred to as the בְּעָלִים "owner". The word בְּעָלִים has the plural suffix even though the ox is only owned by one person. In this case, the plural suffix magnifies the noun imbuing it with a connotation of "absolute owner, complete master". Because בְּעָלִים "owner" is a *majestic plural* it gets a singular verb. Thus we read concerning the negligent owner whose ox has killed, "the ox shall be stoned and the owner (he) will be put to death" (Ex 21:29). The verb וְנָתַתְּ meaning "he will be put to death" is in the singular even though the word for "owner" בְּעָלִים has the plural suffix. The common characteristic of *majestic plurals* is that they have the plural suffix while denoting singular objects and as a result they receive singular adjectives and singular verbs. Elohim is quite simply an example of the *majestic plural* and means "great God".

It is worth noting that the word Elohim is not always a *majestic plural*. When referring to the pagan gods, the term Elohim is usually a *numerical plural*. For example, the second commandment forbids us to worship אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים "other (pl) gods". In this phrase, not only does Elohim have the plural suffix, but it receives a plural adjective אֲחֵרִים *other (pl)*. This tells us that in the second commandment Elohim is used not as an *majestic plural* but as a *numerical plural* denoting *multiplicity*. The prohibition is not against a specific "other (sg) god" but against *any* "other (pl) gods". Elohim is used numerous times throughout the Tanach to refer to pagan gods and in most of these instances it is a *numerical plural* denoting multiple (false) gods. So we see that when the Tanach speaks about YHWH it uses Elohim as the *majestic plural* meaning "great God" but when it speaks about pagan gods it uses Elohim as

a *numerical plural* meaning "gods". In both instances the accompanying verbs and adjectives reveal to us which meaning is intended.

Does the *majestic plural* form of Elohim implies that there is anything multiple about God? To help clarify this it is worth looking at the few instances where the *majestic plural* form of Elohim is used to refer to someone other than YHWH. The clearest example of this is in Exodus 7:1. In this passage YHWH tells Moses that he will make him an Elohim to Pharaoh: "Behold I have made you an Elohim to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet" (Exodus 7:1). Certainly this does not mean that YHWH made Moses into a god, but rather that he would speak to Pharaoh with authority through Aaron who would serve as his mouth-piece in the way that the prophets serve as the mouth-pieces of YHWH. In any event, there is clearly nothing multiple about Moses, even though he was made an Elohim to Pharaoh.

On rare occasions Elohim is used as *majestic plural* even when referring to pagan gods. For example, "And they bowed down to Ashtoret the Elohim of the Sidonians, to Kemosh the Elohim of Moab, and to Milkom the Elohim of the children of Amon." (1Ki 11:33). Here we see three pagan deities each of which is referred to as an Elohim. Obviously the book of Kings is not saying that any of these false deities is a "great God". On the contrary, the verse goes on to rebuke the Israelites for worshipping them. The meaning is that the Sidonians, Moabites, and Ammonites looked upon their deities as *great Gods* and in this instance Scripture employs the terms used by the pagans themselves to refer to their own deities. At the same time we must observe that Ashtoret, Kemosh, and Milkom are each referred to as Elohim even though there is nothing multiple about any one of them.

Clearly the word Elohim, when it refers to YHWH, is an *majestic plural* which is *numerically singular*, having a singular

verb and a singular adjective. This *majestic plural* is simply a grammatical form that denotes *greatness* without any implication that the object itself is a plurality or multiplicity. If we maintain that Elohim implies multiplicity then we must concede that Moses was also a multiplicity along with Kemosh the pagan deity of the Moabites and Milkom the pagan deity of the Ammonites.

That YHWH is a single individual and not a multiplicity of gods or personalities is consistent with what we find throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses declares to the children of Israel, "YHWH is our Elohim, YHWH is one" (Dt 6:4). Were YHWH a multiplicity of gods or personalities what would be the point of saying that He is "one"? It is worth noting that it does not say YHWH is one of something (one god, one personality). He is just simply "one", in every respect of the word. Similarly, the prophet Zechariah tells us about the universal worship of YHWH at the end of days, "And YHWH will be king over the entire earth; at that time YHWH will be one and his name will be one" (Zech 14:9). Zechariah is saying that today people multiply YHWH but at the end-time all mankind will know that YHWH is a single individual deity with one single name. We are taught in the book of Isaiah that YHWH is the one and only, "I am YHWH and besides me there is no savior" (Isa 43:11). Elsewhere in Isaiah, YHWH poses the rhetorical question, "Is there an *Eloha* (God) besides me?" (Isa 44:8). Similarly we read in the Psalms, "Who is an *Eloha* (God) besides YHWH and who is a rock (=savior) besides our Elohim?" (Ps 18:32). In these verses the word for "God" is *Eloha* אֱלֹהִים, the singular form of Elohim. These passages are saying that YHWH is an *Eloha* and besides Him there is no other *Eloha*. Indeed, YHWH is called by the singular *Eloha* (God) some 47 times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures which proves that He is not a plurality or multiplicity. This and the fact that the verbs and adjectives connected with Elohim are always singular confirm our conclusion that Elohim is an *majestic plural* denoting a singular individual but with a connotation of *greatness*.

Some pronounce Elo'ah or Elowah.

YHWH is called *Eloha* (God), the singular form of Elohim, in the following verses: Dt 32:15.17; Isa 44:8; Hab 3:3; Ps 18:32; 50:22; 114:7; 139:19; Job 3:4; 3:23; 4:9.17; 5:17; 6:4.7.9; 9:13; 10:2; 11:5; 12:4.6; 16:21; 19:6.21.26.; 21:9.19; 22:12.26; 24:12; 27:3.8.10; 29:2.4; 31:2.6; 33:12.26; 35:10; 36:2; 37:15.22; 39:17; 40:2; Prov 30:5; Neh 9:17.

## Elohim: Plural or Singular (Part 2)

In part 1 we saw that the word *Elohim* is an "intensive plural". The *intensive plural* has the plural ending but the verbs and adjectives that accompany it are singular. The intensive plural denotes a singular object or individual but adds a connotation of greatness. So Elohim does not mean *gods* but *great God*.

Until now it was observed that the verbs and adjectives connected with Elohim are always singular. However, in the book of Genesis we find three passages in which God speaks in the first person plural as "we", "our", and "us". The first such passage deals with the creation of mankind, in which God declares, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the animals and over the whole earth and over all the creeping things that creep on the earth." (Gen 1:26). Who is this "us" and "our"? Does God have multiple personalities? Is there more than one God?

Immediately before the words "Let us make man in our image" we read "And (he) Elohim said" וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים וַיֵּאמֶר. The word וַיֵּאמֶר "and he said" is the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular form of the verb אָמַר (*qal inverted future*). This indicates that the speaker is a singular individual. Were Elohim a plurality the verse would have opened "And (they) Elohim said" וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהִים. The phrase "Elohim said/spoke" appears about fifty times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in every single instance it is "(he) God said/ spoke" in the singular and never "(they) God said/ spoke" in the plural.



From the words "Let us make man" we might expect mankind to be created by multiple creators. The word נַעֲשֶׂה "let us make" is the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural (*qal future*) of the verb עָשָׂה (to do, to make). The 1- prefix indicates that it is "us" which seems to imply multiple creators. Similarly, from the words בְּצַלְמֵנוּ בְּדְמוּתֵנוּ "in our image after our likeness" we might expect man to be made in the images of multiple individuals. The suffix -נוּ at the end of each word is the possessive suffix which means "our". We might think that "our" image and "our" likeness refers to multiple individuals with similar characteristics with which mankind was to be endowed. Yet when the creation of mankind actually takes place, in the very next verse, it says, "And (he) Elohim created man in His image, in the image of Elohim He created him" בְּצַלְמוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת אֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְרָא בְּצַלְמוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים בְּצַלְמוֹ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים (Gen 1:27). So man was not created by the multiple "we" but by the single individual Elohim who is termed "He". Nor was man created in the image of a group of multiple individuals but only in the single image of Elohim which is described as "His image", that is, the single image of the Creator. Were Elohim a multiplicity the verse would have to have read, "And (they) Elohim created man in their image, in the image of Elohim they created them" אֱלֹהִים בְּצַלְמָם הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְרָאוּ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים בְּצַלְמָם הָאֱלֹהִים בְּרָאוּ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים. Since this is not what Scripture says we must conclude once again that Elohim is a singular individual.

What of the other two instances in which God speaks in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural as "we/ us"? The next instance is in the Garden of Eden Account. After Adam eats of the forbidden fruit, God declares, "Behold the man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22). Despite this reference to "us" we again find that God is a singular individual. The very same verse opens, "And (he) YHWH Elohim said". Were YHWH Elohim a plurality the verse would have to have read, "And (they) YHWH Elohim said". Furthermore, after God explains the concern that the undeserving Adam may eat from the Tree of Life we read, "And (he) YHWH

Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". It is the single individual YHWH Elohim who banishes Adam from the garden, not the plural "we".

The third instance of the divine "we" appears in the Tower of Babel Account. After observing that mankind is in a state of rebellion, God declares, "Let us go down and let us mix up there their language" (Gen 11:7). The very same speech opens, "And (he) YHWH said" (Gen 11:6) which indicates that we are dealing with a single individual YHWH. When God actually descends to mix up the languages we read, "And (he) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". In this passage as well, YHWH is referred to as a singular individual ("He said", "He scattered").

## The Royal We

If YHWH Elohim is a single individual, why does He speak about "we", "our", and "us"? How can any singular speaker refer to himself as "we"? There is a linguistic phenomenon in which a speaker refers to himself in the plural. In many cultures and civilizations kings refer to themselves in the first person plural as "we". This is generally considered a sign of self-magnification, similar to the *intensive plural* used to magnify nouns. The best-known example of this is the British royal family who use the "*royal we*". The 19<sup>th</sup> century English Queen Victoria used to express her dissatisfaction by declaring, "We are not amused" rather than the expected, "I am not amused". In modern English the *royal we* is used in a variety of contexts not necessarily related to royalty. For example, in certain types of formal speaking and writing, "we" can be used "by a speaker or writer, in order to secure an impersonal tone, or to avoid the obtrusive repetition of 'I'". Modern English also has the "modest we" in which "a person uses a plural form in order not to call attention to himself as an individual." In some dialects of American English "we" is used in



place of "I" as a colloquialism, without any connotation of formality or self-magnification. For example, "Give us a chance!" in certain dialects of American English has the meaning of "Give me a chance!". Thus the *royal we* in English is not strictly speaking "royal" as it is used in a number of social contexts.

In ancient times, the *royal we* was not strictly speaking "royal" either. Instead it was used as a formal mode of address in the context of a "royal court". An ancient king was always surrounded by a host of advisors, ministers, and attendants known as the "royal court" or "royal council". Daniel, standing in the Babylonian *royal court*, said to king Nebuchadnezzar, "This dream and its interpretation we shall say in the king's presence " (Dan 2:36 [Aramaic]). The singular individual Daniel refers to himself as "we" because this is the formal mode of address used in the royal court. Job's companion, Bildad the Shuchite complains to Job, "Why have we been considered as an animal, as stupid (pl) in your eyes" (Job 18:3). When Bildad says "we" he is not referring to himself and his two companions. Were this the case he would have said, "Why have we been considered as animals". The fact that Bildad complains that he has been considered "an animal" in the singular proves he is only talking about himself. While Bildad is not in a royal court he uses the *royal we* because he is partaking in a royal court-like audience. Before being tested by God, Job had been a local nobleman with great wealth (Job 1:3). After losing everything, Job sat on the floor (like a king sits on his throne) surrounded by his companions who came to comfort him and give him advice (like a king's courtiers) (Job 2:11-13). Job's companions proceed to give long flowery speeches full of advice in the manner that courtiers might address a king in the royal court. As a result, they occasionally resort to the use of the *royal we*. In both of the above examples the speaker is addressing a royal court or similar forum. In this context, the *royal we* is employed as a formal mode of address, somewhat like the "we" used in certain types of formal English oratory and writing (see above). It is worth

noting that the *royal we* was used in an erratic fashion in biblical times. Thus when Daniel addresses the royal court on a different occasion he speaks as "I" (e.g. Dan 5:7). This is rather like the queen of England who now only refers to herself as "we" on rare occasions.

Another example of the *royal we* can be found in the words of Ahab king of Israel. Ahab had been planning an invasion of Aram and assembled 400 prophets to tell him how victorious he would be. Sitting on his royal throne before his assembly of courtiers Ahab asked the 400 prophets, "Shall we go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall I hold back" (2Chr 18:5). When speaking in the royal court the king freely switches off between the *royal we* and the regular "I"! The 400 prophets respond to Ahab as a singular king, "Go up (singular) and God will deliver into the hand of the king" (2Chr 18:5). Despite Ahab's use of the *royal we*, he is not "mysteriously" transformed into a multiplicity of personalities and his four hundred false prophets accordingly speak to him as a single individual king.

## The Heavenly Council

If the ancients used the *royal we* as a formal mode of address when speaking in a royal court or council, who is YHWH addressing when he says "Let us make man in our image"? Does YHWH have a royal council? For that matter would the all-powerful Creator of the universe bother to tell His creations what He is about to do before doing it? As a matter of fact He would! Scripture informs us that YHWH is a wise king and like a human king he informs His subjects of what he is about to do. Thus we read, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* סוד to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The Hebrew word סוד *council* literally means a grouping of people such as an assembly or congregation, as in the verse, "Let not my soul come into their *assembly* סוד, let not my honor be united with their

congregation" (Gen 49:6). By extension סוּד also has the meaning of an assembly of advisors, as in the verse, "Plans are foiled without *council* ?דו, but they succeed through many advisors" (Prov 15:22). In this last verse most English translations render the word סוּד as "counsel", that is, the advice given by a council of advisors. However, the Hebrew word סוּד refers to the council of advisors itself, and only indirectly to the advice that they give. When we read in Amos that YHWH reveals "His council" סוּד to the prophets the meaning is that he makes known to them the secret deliberations that took place in the heavenly council. It is knowledge of these deliberations that false prophets are said to lack, as we read in Jeremiah, "For who among them has stood in the *council of YHWH* ?דוה ?דוה and seen and heard his word? Who among them has listened to His word and heard?" (Jer 23:18). We see that a true prophet has knowledge of the deliberations that take place in the "council of YHWH" whereas the false prophet lacks this knowledge. We read further in the same passage, "(21) I did not send those prophets... I did not speak to them yet they prophesied. (22) Now if they have stood in my *council* ?דו, let them announce my words to My people that they return from their evil way and the wickedness of their actions" (Jer 23:21-22). Again we see that the false prophets are unable to speak the word of YHWH because they have no knowledge of the deliberations that took place in His heavenly council.

What is the "council of YHWH"? We find throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that YHWH is said to be surrounded by a large host of angels. For example, in one vision Daniel sees YHWH sitting like a king surrounded by millions of attendants:

"(9) And the Ancient One sat down, His garment like white snow, and the hair of His head like clean wool, His throne flames of fire and its wheels burning fire. (10) A river of fire flowed forth; a million attended Him and a hundred million stood before Him. The judgment began and the books were opened." (Dan 7:9-10)

In Daniel's vision YHWH is described as a mighty king with a large council of courtiers. YHWH sits like a wise king in judgment (Prov 20:8; 29:14; 1Ki 3:28; 2Sam 15:2). The courtiers serve as YHWH's royal council of advisors and among other things keep records.

Another description of the heavenly council can be found in the vision of Michayahu ben Yimla. Michayahu was called to advise Ahab King of Israel on whether or not he should set off on his invasion of Aram. We have already seen that Ahab assembled 400 prophets all of whom told him he would be victorious in this invasion. However, one lone prophet, Michayahu ben Yimla, informed the king that he would die in battle and that the other prophets had been misled by a false spirit of prophecy. Michayahu explains how this false spirit of prophecy came to infect Ahab's prophets:

"(19) And he said, therefore, listen to the word of YHWH. I saw YHWH sitting on His throne and the entire host of heaven standing on His right and His left. (20) And YHWH said, Who will tempt Ahab that he go up and fall in the highlands of Gilead. And one said, 'In this manner' and another said, 'In that manner.' (21) And a certain spirit went forth and stood before YHWH and said, 'I will tempt him'. And YHWH said to him, 'In what manner?' (22) And he said, 'I will go out and be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And He said, 'You shall tempt and be successful. Go and make it so!'" (1Ki 22:19-22).

In Michayahu's vision YHWH sits like a king on His throne surrounded by His royal council which consists of the "entire host of heaven". The "host of heaven" refers to the angels, as in the verse, "Praise Him, all His angels! Praise Him, all His hosts!" (Ps 148:2). YHWH consults His angels in the same way as a flesh and blood king might consult the members of his *royal council*. The angels raise various proposals ("And one said, 'In this manner' and

another said, 'In that manner.'). Finally a "spirit" comes forth and proposes that it be a false spirit of prophecy in the mouth of the prophets of Ahab. YHWH accepts the proposal and orders the spirit to carry out the mission.

Another description of the heavenly council appears in the book of Job. We read there, "And it was a certain time, and the *sons of God* came to stand before YHWH" (Job 1:6; 2:1). What follows is a deliberation between YHWH and a satanic angel, similar to that which took place in the vision of Michayahu between YHWH and the spirit of false prophecy. The "sons of God" that comprise the members of the heavenly court are the angels. The angels are called "sons of God" because they are YHWH's holy and chosen messengers. The Israelites are also described as *sons of God*, as we read in Deuteronomy:

"(1) You are sons of YHWH your God, you shall not cut yourselves nor place a baldness on your head for the dead. (2) Because you are a holy nation to YHWH your God, and YHWH has chosen you to be His chosen people out of all the nations on the face of the earth." (Dt 14:1-2).

Israel is forbidden to partake in pagan mourning practices because they are "sons of YHWH", which means they are a "holy nation to YHWH", a "chosen nation". So to be a "son of God" simply means to be *holy, chosen by God*. The angels are called "sons of God" in Job because they too are "chosen" and "holy". In fact, one of the biblical terms for angel is קְדוֹשׁ "holy one". Daniel sees an angel in a vision which he describes as a "holy one" (Dan 8:13). In Nebuchadnezzar's dream he sees "an angel and a holy one coming down from heaven" (Dan 4:10 [Aramaic]). The phrase "an angel and a holy one" is an example of the stylistic device *hendiadys*, that is, "two that are one" (like בְּהוֹיָהוּ תְהוֹיָהוּ). This means that "angel" and "holy one" are functionally synonymous in this context.

The terms "angel" and "son of God" are also used synonymously. When Nebuchadnezzar throws Daniel's three companions into the fiery furnace, he is surprised to see a fourth person in the furnace with them. He explains that "the appearance of the fourth one is like a son of God בְּרִי אֱלֹהִים" (Dan 3:25 [Aramaic]). **Only a few verses later Nebuchadnezzar declares, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Aved-Nego who sent His angel מְלַאֲכָה and saved His servants who trusted in Him"**(Dan 3:28 [Aramaic]). Thus when Nebuchadnezzar sees a man with the appearance of "a son of God" he knows this to be an "angel" מְלַאֲכָה of God.

The phrase "holy ones" is used interchangeably with the phrase "sons of God" when referring to the *heavenly council* of angels. Thus we read "May your wonder, O YHWH, be professed in heaven; even your faithfulness in the congregation of holy ones" (Ps 89:6). The "congregation of holy ones" קְדוֹשִׁים קְהָל in Ps 89:6 is the heavenly council of angels and in the following verses is referred to as the "sons of God" אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי (Ps 89:7) and the "great council of holy ones" קְדוֹשִׁים סוּד (Ps 89:8).

## The Divine "We"

We have seen that kings and courtiers use the *royal we* as a formal mode of address in the royal council. We have also seen that YHWH is described as being surrounded by a heavenly council of angels. In the sixth chapter of Isaiah we find that YHWH uses the *royal we* when addressing the heavenly council. In Isaiah's vision he sees YHWH on His throne surrounded by the heavenly council of angels:

"(1) In the year that king Uziyahu died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and elevated, and His train filling the sanctuary. (2) Burning-ones (*seraphim*) standing above him, six wings each one, with two it covers its face, and with two it legs, and with two it



flies. (3) And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts, the entire earth is filled with his glory... (8) And I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Who shall I send and who shall go for us?' and I said 'Here I am, send me!' And He said, 'Go and say to this people...'" (Isa 6:1-3,8-9)

YHWH is sitting on His throne as the king of the entire universe surrounded by fiery angels. As in the vision of Michayahu, YHWH addresses his court asking who He should send on the divine mission. When addressing the heavenly council YHWH freely switches off between "I" and the *royal we*, even in mid-sentence! YHWH says, "Who shall I send and who shall go for us?" This is reminiscent of Ahab's question to his royal council, "Shall we go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall I hold back" (2Chr 18:5). Both YHWH and Ahab freely switch off between "I" and the *royal we* when addressing the royal/ heavenly council.

## Conclusion

When YHWH says in Gen 3:26, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" He is also addressing the heavenly council of angels. The same is true when He says, "Behold the man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22) and "Let us go down and let us mix up there their language" (Gen 11:7). In all three instances YHWH is speaking to His heavenly council of angels as He did in the visions of Michayahu and Isaiah and in the book of Job. This is also what is meant in the verse, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* סוד to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). We see from this that YHWH's actions are deliberated upon in His *heavenly council* סוד of angels. The use of the *royal we* is simply a formal mode of address employed when speaking before such a council. It can be freely used by kings and courtiers, but it does not imply the king or courtier is a multiplicity. Daniel, Bildad, and Ahab all spoke in this

fashion even though they were all singular individuals with single personalities. YHWH, the king of the entire universe, speaks in this fashion before His heavenly council of angels. Yet when YHWH acts he is always described as acting alone as a singular individual. Thus in the first "we" passage we find, "And Elohim (he) created man in His image" and not "And Elohim (they) created man in their image". In the second "we" passage we find, "And (he) YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden" and not "And (they) YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". Finally, in the third "we" passage we find "And (he) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth" and not "And (they) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". Although YHWH brought up these actions for deliberation in the heavenly council, when they were actually carried out YHWH is said to have done them alone, for YHWH is the sole master of all creation, as it is written:

"(5) I am YHWH and there is no other; besides Me there are no gods; I have girded you [i.e. protected you] even though you did not know Me. (6) So that they will know from the rising of the sun to the setting that there is none besides Me; I am YHWH and there is no other. (7) The one who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil, I YHWH do all these things." (Isa 45:5-7).

### **Elohim: Plurality and "Attraction" Part 3**

In part 1 it was observed that YHWH is called *Elohim* God, a plural noun with the plural suffix *-im* -ים. However, we saw that Elohim is not a numerical plural denoting more than one god but rather a majestic plural denoting greatness and having a numerically singular meaning. This was clear from the adjectives and verbs that accompany Elohim. A numerical plural (e.g. dogs) would be accompanied by plural verbs and plural adjectives. However, Elohim appears over 2000 times in the Tanach and in

virtually every occurrence it is accompanied by singular verbs and singular adjectives.

But what of those instances in which Elohim does have plural adjectives and verbs? Of course, there are numerous instances in which Elohim really is meant in the plural sense and therefore receives plural verbs and adjectives. For example, when the Philistines are plagued by the Holy Ark they cry out in desperation:

"Woe to us! Who shall save us from the hand of these (*eleh* אֵלֹהִים?) great (*ha'adirim* הַאֲדִירִים) gods, these (*eleh* אֵלֹהִים) gods are they (*hem* הֵם) that (they) smote (*hamakim* הַמַּכִּים) the Egyptians with every plague in the desert." (1 Samuel 4:8).

The Philistines use the word Elohim along with a plural adjective ("great" *ha'adirim* הַאֲדִירִים), plural pronouns ("these" *eleh* אֵלֹהִים; "they" *hem* הֵם), and even a plural verb ("they that smote/smote" *hamakim* הַמַּכִּים) and there can be little doubt that when they said Elohim they meant "gods". But, the Philistines were heathens who believed in many gods. What interests us are those instances in which Elohim is presumably a majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning but nevertheless has a plural verb or plural adjective. There are in fact nine such instances in the entire Tanach, which we shall presently consider.

### **\*\*Elohim with Plural Verbs\*\***

**The first instance of Elohim with a plural verb is in Gen 20:13. In this passage Abraham explains to Abimelech how he plotted with Sarah to lie about her being his sister:**

"And it was when God caused me to wander (*hit'u oti Elohim* הִתְעָוָה אֱלֹהִים) from the house of my father, that I said to her, this is the righteousness that you shall do with me, to every place which we

come, say about me, he is my brother"

The phrase "God caused me to wander" *hit'u oti Elohim* אֱתִי הִתְעוּ אֱלֹהִים has the plural verb *hit'u* הִתְעוּ meaning "they caused to wander" (hif'il past 3rd pl ה.ע.ת.). So contrary to the expected rule of Elohim getting a singular verb, here Elohim gets a plural verb. Because of this plural verb, we could literally translate this phrase "gods caused me to wander". From this verse alone it indeed appears that Abraham worshipped multiple gods whom he believed had caused him to wander from his father's house. However, this hardly fits the overall picture. In Gen 24 Abraham again refers to God taking him from his father's house and this time the verb accompanying Elohim is singular:

"YHWH, the Elohim of heaven, who took me (*lekachani* לָקַחַנִי) from the house of my father, and from my birthplace, and who spoke (*diber* דִּבֶּר) to me, and who swore (*nishba'* נִשְׁבַּע) to me saying, to your seed I will give this land" (Gen 24:7)

In this passage Elohim is accompanied by three singular verbs: *lekachani* לָקַחַנִי "He took me", *diber* דִּבֶּר "He spoke", and *nishba'* נִשְׁבַּע "He swore". So when Abraham talks about YHWH taking him from his father's house in Gen 20 he refers to Him as a numerical plural but in Gen 24 he refers to Him as a numerical singular. How can we explain this paradox?

Some exegetes, desperate to make sense of this difficult passage, have suggested that Abraham was speaking about YHWH in the plural because he was addressing Abimelech, an idolater who worshipped many gods. This explanation might work, were this the only time that we found Elohim accompanied by a plural verb.

**However, in Gen 35:7 we find a second instance of this phenomenon. In this passage, we read about how Jacob built**

### **an altar at Bethel after his vision of the ladder:**

"And he built there an altar and called the place, El Bet El, because there God revealed himself (pl) to him (*niglu elav ha'elohim* נִגְלוּ הָאֱלֹהִים אֵלָיו) when he fled from his brother"

The phrase "God revealed himself (pl) to him" (*niglu elav ha'elohim* נִגְלוּ הָאֱלֹהִים אֵלָיו) has the plural verb *niglu* נִגְלוּ meaning "they revealed themselves" or alternatively "they were revealed" (*nif'al* past 3rd pl ג.ל.ה.). We could literally translate this phrase as "the gods revealed themselves to him". Again, we find Elohim accompanied by a plural verb contrary to the expected rule for a majestic plural. Here we can hardly say that someone is trying to speak in the terms of an idolater since it is the narrator (Moses) himself who says these words. From these two verses in Genesis we might conclude that God is a plurality. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that in Genesis alone the word Elohim, referring to YHWH, gets singular verbs, adjectives, or pronouns some 157 times and only in these two instances does it receive plural verbs. At the same time, there is only one other instance in the entire Tanach of Elohim getting a plural verb.

### **The third instance of Elohim getting a plural verb appears in 2 Samuel 7:23 where David prays to YHWH:**

"And who is like Your (sg) people (*che'amcha* כְּעַמָּךְ) Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim (they) went (*halchu* הִלְכוּ) to redeem for Himself (*lo* לוֹ) as a people"

In this verse David boasts that Israel is unique because God redeemed the Israelites for Himself, that is, he metaphorically paid their redemption price, thereby purchasing Israel as His own. The phrase "whom Elohim went to redeem" contains the plural verb *halchu* הִלְכוּ meaning "they went", that is "Elohim (they) went" rather than the expected singular verb *halach* הִלַּךְ "Elohim (he)

went". Here again it appears that Elohim receives a plural verb contrary to the expected rule for majestic plural.

However, in this passage we also find Elohim referred to as a numerical singular. David says *che'amcha* כְּעַמְּךָ "like Your people". In Hebrew the word "your" is expressed by a "possessive suffix" attached to the end of a word. But unlike English, Hebrew actually has four different words or suffixes for "your" depending on whether the "your" in question is masculine or feminine and singular or plural:

Four Types of "Your" in Hebrew		
	singular	plural
masculine	- <i>cha</i> -ךָ	- <i>chem</i> -כֶּם
feminine	- <i>ach</i> -כִּי	- <i>chen</i> -כֶּן

All four Hebrew suffixes translate into English as "your" but in Hebrew we can know based on which suffix is used whether the "your" in question is singular or plural. Now David refers to Elohim as "Your" with the masculine singular suffix *-cha* -ךָ. Were Elohim a numerical plural David would have referred to Him as "Your" with the plural suffix *-chem* -כֶּם. When David refers to Elohim as "your" with the singular suffix *-cha* -ךָ it is clear that he understands YHWH to be a numerical singular.

Again in this same verse, David says that Elohim has redeemed



Israel "for Himself (*lo* לו) as a people". The Hebrew word *lo* לו "for Himself" also makes it clear that David thinks of Elohim as a singular. Were Elohim meant as a plural David would have said that Elohim redeemed Israel "for themselves" *lahem* להֶם. Since David did not say this we must conclude that he understood Elohim to be a numerical singular.

Our conclusion about Elohim being a numerical singular in David's prayer is confirmed by the Book of Chronicles. Chronicles repeats many of the accounts reported in Samuel and Kings, often slightly paraphrasing them. In 1Chr 17:21 David's prayer appears word for word but with a slight difference:

"And who is like Your people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim (he) went (*halach* הִלַּךְ) to redeem for Himself a people"

In the Chronicler's paraphrase of David's prayer, the phrase "whom Elohim went to redeem for Himself" no longer has the plural verb *halchu* הִלְכוּ "they went", but instead has the singular verb *halach* הִלַּךְ "He went". So the Chronicler understood David as referring to a numerical singular Elohim and this is reflected in his paraphrase of David's prayer.

Clearly Elohim is a numerical singular, even in David's prayer in which it receives a plural verb. But the basic question still remains. Why are there these three instances in the Tanach where Elohim receives a plural verb? The fact that David clearly meant to express Elohim as a numerical singular only heightens this questions. Let us remember that the rule of Elohim receiving a singular verb does actually work in some 2000 instances and the three verses just mentioned are the only exceptions in the entire Tanach. So why would a majestic plural, which expresses a numerical singular and which is supposed to receive a singular verb, nevertheless receive a plural verb? Is it because Elohim is

both a plurality and a singularity at the same time? Could it be that these three anomalous verses hint at some great mystery about the paradoxical and contradictory nature of God? Or is there a much simpler, linguistic explanation?

## Plurality and the Golden Calf

To answer this question we must consider other instances in which a majestic plural receives a plural verb but where the majestic plural in question does not refer to YHWH. An interesting example can be found in the incident of the Golden Calf in Ex 32. When Moses delayed in returning from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites rebelled against YHWH and made for themselves a molten calf:

"(3) And all the nation broke the golden rings in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (4) And he took from their hands and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf, and they said: 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who (they) brought you up (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלוּךָ) from the Land of Egypt'" (Ex 32:3-4)

We can see that the golden calf is called an Elohim and then twice referred to as plural both by the demonstrative pronoun "these" (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) and by the verb "they brought you up" (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלוּךָ). The problem here is that the golden calf itself is a singular calf. Why would the Israelites call a single calf "gods"? As we read further in the account it is clear that we are dealing with a single false god. Thus v.5 continues: "And Aaron saw and built an altar in front of him (*lefanav* לְפָנָיו)". The "him" being referred to is the singular calf. Were the calf a multiplicity of gods v.5 would have said that Aaron built an altar before "them" (*lifnehem* לִפְנֵיהֶם). Again in v.8 YHWH tells Moses about Israel's sin with the golden calf, "**they bowed down to him and they sacrificed to him**". Again there is one singular calf. So why would the Israelites refer to the golden calf in the plural? Did the

Israelites believe this single golden calf to contained within it a plurality of gods or personalities? There is evidence that this is not the case. In the book of Nehemiah the Levites offer a prayer which retells the story of the golden calf. In this Levitical paraphrase we read:

"They even made for themselves a molten calf, and said, 'This (zeh הַזֶּה) is your Elohim who (he) brought you up (he'elcha הֵעֲלָנוּךְ) from Egypt'" (Neh 9:18).

In the Levitical paraphrase in Nehemiah the declaration of the Israelites about the golden calf has been transferred into the singular. Instead of "these are your Elohim" we now read "This (zeh הַזֶּה) is your Elohim". Instead of "they brought you up" (he'elucha הֵעֲלָנוּךְ) we now read "he brought you up" (he'elcha הֵעֲלָנוּךְ). Clearly the Levites in the time of Nehemiah understood the golden calf as a numerically singular false god, and not as a multiplicity of gods. In other words, when the Levites in the time of Nehemiah read the words of the Israelites in the desert about the golden calf, 'These (eleh הֵלֵךְ) are your Elohim, Israel, who (they) brought you up (he'elucha הֵעֲלָנוּךְ) from the Land of Egypt' they understood them to mean 'This (zeh הַזֶּה) is your Elohim who (he) brought you up (he'elcha הֵעֲלָנוּךְ) from Egypt'.

## Attraction

What did the Levites in the time of Nehemiah know that we have not yet considered? Is there some linguistic phenomenon that could explain why the Israelites in the desert would speak about a numerically singular golden calf as if it were a plurality using a plural verb? As a matter of fact there is. Numerous languages contain a linguistic phenomenon called "attraction". Attraction occurs when a verb or adjective is influenced by a nearby noun, resulting in a deviation from the expected number or gender. The *American Heritage Book of English Usage* brings the following

example of attraction in English:

*When you get to the stop light, there's a gas station on the left and a grocery store on the right.*

Strictly speaking this sentence should read "there are a gas station on the left and a grocery store on the right" since gas station and grocery store are two items and therefore require the plural verb "are". The *American Heritage Book of English Usage* explains: "Although this usage would seem to violate the rules of subject and verb agreement, the attraction of the verb to the singular noun phrase following it is so strong that it is hard to avoid the construction entirely."

This sort of attraction is common in Hebrew. For example, we read in Gen 3:8 "and the man and his wife (he) hid (*vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא)". The Hebrew uses the singular *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא "and he hid" even though both Adam and his wife hid. Grammatically we should expect to find "and they hid" *vayitchab'u* וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ. But the verb is "attracted" to "the man" which is physically adjacent in the sentence, causing the expected plural verb "and they hid" *vayitchab'u* וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ to be superceded by the singular "and he hid" *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא. Quite simply the verb latches onto the nearby noun and becomes modified by it. This is indeed extremely common in lists of multiple members. Whenever there is a list in Hebrew of "X and Y" this list should, grammatically speaking, receive a plural verb. So proper Hebrew grammar would require: "X and Y (they) did Z". Yet a list such as this often results in attraction: "X and Y (he) did Z".

To better understand attraction let us consider the following example:

"And Miriam and Aaron (she) spoke (*vatedaber* וַתְּדַבֵּר)" (Nu 12:1)

"Miriam and Aaron" should have received the verb "and they spoke" *vayedabru* וַיְדַבְּרוּ, but because of attraction the verb changes to "and she spoke" *vatedaber* וַתְּדַבֵּר. Of course, in Hebrew the verb often comes before the noun, so in the above verse the word order is actually: "And (she) spoke Miriam and Aaron". Because of the verb's position in the sentence it is attracted to the feminine singular Miriam and we end up with the almost comical "and she spoke" to describe the actions of both Miriam and Aaron. To be sure, attraction is an exception to the rule and usually we will find singular verbs for singular subjects and plural verbs for plural subjects. But attraction is common enough that we may not dismiss it as an error; instead it is a genuine linguistic phenomenon.

Attraction also occurs in adjectives. We may remember that in Hebrew the adjective must match the noun in number and gender. So a singular noun gets a singular adjective. Yet sometimes the adjective is attracted to a nearby noun causing it to become plural. A well-known example appears in the Song of Hanna in 1 Sam 2:4. In the standard English translations we read: "The bows of the mighty men are broken" [KJV]. But what it actually says in Hebrew is:

"The bow (*keshet* קֶשֶׁת) of the mighty men (*giborim* גִּבּוֹרִים) are broken (*chatim* חֲתִים)".

The Hebrew word *chatim* חֲתִים "are broken" is a plural adjective. But the noun that this adjective is modifying is *keshet* קֶשֶׁת "bow", a feminine singular noun. The adjective should have been *chata* חֲתָה "is broken" in the feminine singular so as to match the feminine singular noun. But the adjective was "attracted" to the nearby *giborim* גִּבּוֹרִים "of the mighty men" and took on its gender and number changing the expected *chata* חֲתָה "is broken" to *chatim* חֲתִים "are broken". The result is the awkward sentence "the bow are broken" rather than the grammatically correct "the bow is broken"! Essentially what happened here is that the feminine singular

adjective *chata* חָתָה "is broken" was "attracted" by the nearby masculine plural suffix *-im* -ים and as a result adopted this suffix.

## Attraction and the Golden Calf

Now that we understand the phenomenon of attraction, we can understand why the golden calf is referred to in the plural. The declaration of the Israelites, 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who (they) brought you up (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלֶנִי) from the Land of Egypt', contains two instances of attraction. The masculine plural ending in the word Elohim attracted the verb ("they brought you up" *he'elcha* הֵעֲלָךְ) and the demonstrative pronoun ("these" *eleh* אֵלֶּה) making them plural as well. This happened even though Elohim was intended as a numerical singular. The masculine plural form of the word Elohim had more attractive pull than the numerically singular meaning. As a result, it appears that the Israelites are referring to the golden calf as multiple false-gods when really they meant only a singular false-god. Thus when the Israelites said, 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who (they) brought you up (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלֶנִי) from the Land of Egypt', they really meant the singular, 'This (*zeh* זֶה) is your Elohim, Israel, who (he) brought you up (*he'elcha* הֵעֲלָךְ) from the Land of Egypt' (just as Hanna really meant "the bow of the mighty men is broken"). This was correctly understood by the Levites in the time of Nehemiah who transferred the statement about the golden calf into the singular.

The same thing must have occurred in the three instances in which Elohim received a plural verb. When Abraham said "when gods caused me to wander (*hit'u oti Elohim* אֵלֹהִים אֶתִּי הִתְעוּ)" he really meant "when God caused me to wander (*hit'a oti Elohim* אֵלֹהִים אֶתִּי הִתְעָה)". Similarly, when we read in the Torah about Jacob's experience at Beth El that, "there gods revealed themselves to him (*niglu elav ha'elohim* אֱלֹהִים אֶלְיוֹ נִגְלוּ)" we must understand this as, "there God revealed himself to him (*nigla elav ha'elohim*



"(הַאֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִגְלָה)". In both instances the masculine plural suffix of Elohim overrode the numerically singular meaning of the majestic plural, and as a result Elohim received plural verbs. That this is what is happening is clearest from the prayer of David. Although David said, "who is like Your (sg) people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim (they) went (*halchu* הֵלְכוּ) to redeem for Himself" he really meant, "who is like Your (sg) people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim (he) went (*halach* הֵלַךְ) to redeem for Himself" and this is how the prayer is correctly understood by the Chronicler. What is significant about David's prayer is that despite the grammatical attraction which affects the verb, the numerically singular meaning of Elohim still survives and thus David refers to Israel as "Your people" in the singular and says that Elohim redeemed Israel "for Himself", again in the singular.

## Elohim with Plural Adjective

Alongside the three examples where Elohim receives a plural verb, there are six examples where Elohim receives a plural adjective and these too must be understood as attraction. In five separate instances (Dt 5:26; 1 Sam 17:26; 1 Sam 17:36; Jer 10:10; Jer 23:36) we find the phrase *Elohim chayyim* אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים "living God" in which Elohim gets the masculine plural adjective *chayyim* חַיִּים "living" (pl). As a majestic plural Elohim should have received the masculine singular adjective *chay* חַי "living" (sg). The expected phrase *Elohim chay* אֱלֹהִים חַי actually appears in four other instances (2Ki 19:4, 16; Isaiah 37:4, 17). But in the five instances of *Elohim chayyim* אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים "living God" with the plural adjective we must determine whether the adjective has been made plural by attraction to Elohim's plural suffix or whether it is a numerical plural with the meaning "living gods". To answer this let us consider two instructive examples. In Dt 5:26 we read, "For who among all flesh has heard the voice of the living (*chayyim*

הַיִּים) Elohim speaking (*medaber* מְדַבֵּר) from the midst of the fire like us and lived."

We see that the adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים is indeed plural, even though as a majestic plural Elohim should have received a singular adjective. However, we also see that the verb "speaking" *medaber* מְדַבֵּר is masculine singular. So while the adjective *chayyim* חַיִּים is attracted to Elohim's plural ending, Elohim does not lose its numerically singular meaning and as a result it still gets a singular verb.

A similar example can be found in Jer 10:10 where we read: "Now YHWH, He (*hu* הוּא) is a true Elohim, a living (*chayyim* חַיִּים) Elohim, and king (*umelech* וּמֶלֶךְ) of the universe; from His wrath (*mikitspo* מִקִּצְפוֹ) does the earth quake, and the nations are unable to withstand His indignation (*za'emo* זַעְמוֹ)."

Again, Elohim receives the plural adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים but is nevertheless referred to no less than four times as a numerical singular. Elohim is called "He" *hu* הוּא and "king" *melech* מֶלֶךְ while reference is made to "His wrath" and "His indignation". Were Elohim a numerical plural we would expect to read that "They (*hem* הֵם) are true Elohim" and that Elohim are "kings" (*melachim* מְלָכִים) while reference would be made to "their wrath" (*kitspam* קִצְפָם) and "their indignation" (*za'emam* זַעְמָם). The fact that Elohim is repeatedly referred to as a numerical singular "He" supports the explanation that the adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים has merely been attracted to Elohim's plural suffix and not that the intended meaning is "living gods".

There is one other example of Elohim receiving a plural adjective, namely in Joshua 24:19:

"And Joshua said to the nation, You will not be able to serve YHWH, because He (*hu* הוּא) is a holy (*kedoshim* קְדוֹשִׁים) Elohim,

He (*hu* הוּא) is a zealous God (*el* אֱלֹהִים), He shall not forgive (*yisa* יִשָּׂא) your transgressions and your sins."

In this verse Elohim receives the *plural* adjective "holy" *kedoshim* קְדוֹשִׁים rather than the expected singular adjective "holy" *kadosh* קְדוֹשׁ. Yet in the same verse Elohim is referred to no less than four times as a numerical singular. It is worth noting that in this verse it would be impossible to read Elohim as a numerical plural since this would result in the nonsensical sentence "He are holy gods"! So we must understand the plural adjective *kedoshim* קְדוֹשִׁים as having been attracted to Elohim's plural suffix *-im* -ים while at the same time still expressing a numerically singular idea.

## More Majestic Plurals

It is worth noting that YHWH is repeatedly referred to as *Adonai* אֲדֹנָי (Lord) some 439 times throughout the Tanach. This epithet literally means "my lords" but is used as a majestic plural. As in the case of Elohim, Adonai also receives singular adjectives, verbs, and pronouns (with no exceptions) proving that it is meant as the numerically singular "Lord". Interestingly enough, even a human master is usually referred to as *Adonim* אֲדֹנָיִם (literally: "lords") using the majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning (e.g. Gen 24:9; 39:2; Ex 21:4; etc.). In Dan 7:18, 22, 25, 27 YHWH is referred to four times as *Elyonin* עֲלִיּוֹנִין literally meaning "most high ones" but this is also a majestic plural meaning "Most High" (this time in Aramaic).

## Summation

YHWH is referred to as Elohim (God) throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Although Elohim is a noun with the plural ending *-im* -ים it does not mean "gods". Hebrew distinguishes between a numerical plural and a majestic plural by the verbs, adjectives, and pronouns that accompany the noun. A numerically plural noun gets

plural verbs, adjectives and pronouns while a numerically singular noun, even with a plural ending, gets singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. Of course, when Elohim is used as a numerical plural meaning "gods", for example, when used by idolators to refer to their false gods, it does have plural verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. However, when referring to YHWH, Elohim always has singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns, making it clear that it is a numerical singular, despite the plural suffix. There are only nine exceptions to this rule, three where Elohim has plural verbs and six where Elohim has plural adjectives. Yet even in these nine passages Elohim retains its meaning of a numerical singular. Thus we find the awkward statement: "He is a living Elohim" where the adjective "living" is plural alongside the singular pronoun "He". Such anomalies are best explained as "attraction", meaning that the singular verb or adjective is "attracted" by the plural suffix of Elohim and as a result it becomes plural. Although attraction is an exception to the general rule it is hardly rare in Hebrew and indeed is found in many languages, ancient and modern. We even have a parallel use of a majestic plural with plural verbs in the incident of the golden calf. Here Elohim is clearly meant as a numerical singular even though it is accompanied by a plural verb. This is also what is happening in the nine instances in which Elohim referring to YHWH has plural verbs or adjectives. Of course, these are rare cases occurring only nine times out of some 2000 appearances of Elohim.

YHWH is also referred to by the epithet Adonai (Lord) which is also a majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning. Like Elohim, Adonai always has singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. In Aramaic YHWH is also called Elyonin, Most High, another majestic plural.

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