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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.

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. שָׁמַר הַכֶּלֶב הַגָּדוֹל

Plural: The big (pl) dogs (they) guarded. שָׁמְרוּ הַכֶּלְבִּים הַגָּדוֹלִים

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 אֱלֹהִים צְדִיק "righteous (sg) Elohim" (Ps 7:10) and *not* אֱלֹהִים צְדִיקִים "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, אֲדֹנָי means "master" while אֲדֹנִים (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 אֲדֹנִי קָשָׁה "a harsh (sg) lord (pl)". In this verse, the plural suffix attached to the word אֲדֹנִי does not make it a *numerical plural* ("masters") but instead magnifies the meaning ("great master, lord"). Because אֲדֹנִי 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 בָּעַל also means "master" while בָּעָלִים 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 בָּעָלִים "owner". The word בָּעָלִים 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 בָּעָלִים "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 וְנָתַתָּ meaning "he will be put to death" is in the singular even though the word for "owner" בָּעָלִים 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* ?לֹהָ, 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.

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