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Elohim: Plurality and "Attraction" Part 3

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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* לֵהָ) great (*ha'adirim* הָאֲדִירִים) gods, these (*eleh* אֵלֵה) 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* הָאֲדִירִים), plural pronouns ("these" *eleh* אֵלֵה; "they" *hem* הֵם), and even a plural verb ("they that smote/ smite" *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* וְהִתְעוּ *oti Elohim* 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* וְהִתְעוּ *oti Elohim* אֱלֹהִים has the plural verb *hit'u* וְהִתְעוּ meaning "they caused to wander" (hif'il past 3rd pl וְהִתְעוּ). 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* לָקַחְנִי) 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* לָקַחְנִי "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 אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים) when he fled from his brother"

The phrase "God revealed himself (pl) to him" (*niglu elav ha'elohim* נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים) has the plural verb *niglu* נִגְלוּ meaning "they revealed themselves" or alternatively "they were revealed" (*nif'al* past 3rd pl נִפְלְגָה). 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* כְּעַמְּךָ) Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim (they) went (*halchu* הָלְכוּ) 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* הָלְכוּ meaning "they went", that is "Elohim (they) went" rather than the expected singular verb *halach* הָלַךְ "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> -ךָ	<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* לוֹ) as a people". The Hebrew word *lo* לוֹ "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* לָהֶם. 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* הָלַךְ) 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* הָלְכוּ "they went", but instead has the singular verb *halach* הָלַךְ "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* הֵעֲלָךְ) 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* הֵעֲלָךְ). 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* זֶה) is your Elohim who (he) brought you up (*he'elcha* הֵעֲלָךְ) 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* זֶה) is your Elohim". Instead of "they brought you up" (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלָךְ) we now read "he brought you up" (*he'elcha* הֵעֲלָךְ). 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* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who (they) brought you up (*he'elucha* הֵעֲלָךְ) from the Land of Egypt' they understood them to mean 'This (*zeh* זֶה) is your Elohim who (he) brought you up (*he'elcha* הֵעֲלָךְ) 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* וַיִּתְּחַבֵּה)". The Hebrew uses the singular *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְּחַבֵּה "and he hid" even though both Adam and his wife hid. Grammatically we should expect to find "and they hid" *vayitchab'u* וַיִּתְּחַבְּוּ. 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* וַיִּתְּחַבְּוּ to be superceded by the singular "and he hid" *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְּחַבֵּה. 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* חֲתָה "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* הֵעֲלָךְ) 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'elucha* 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* הֵעֲלָךְ) from the Land of Egypt', they really meant the singular, 'This (*zeh* זֶה) is your Elohim, Israel, who (he) brought you up (*he'elucha* 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* אֱלֹהִים הִתְעוּ אוֹתִי)" he really meant "when God caused me to wander (*hit'a oti Elohim* אֱלֹהִים הִתְעָה אוֹתִי)". 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* נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים)" we must understand this as, "there God revealed himself to him (*nigla elav ha'elohim* נִגְלָה אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים)". 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* הֵלֵךְ) 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* חַיִּים) 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* זַעֲמוֹ)."

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* זַעֲמָם). 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* קְדוּשִׁים) Elohim, He (*hu* הוּא) is a zealous God (*el* אֵל), He shall not forgive (*yisa* יָשָׁא) your transgressions and your sins."

In this verse Elohim receives the *plural* adjective "holy" *kedoshim* קְדוּשִׁים rather than the expected singular adjective "holy" *kadosh* קָדוֹשׁ. 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* קְדוּשִׁים 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* אֲדֹנִים (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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