

One God

Elohim

by Sean Finnegan

Yahweh is referred to as *Elohim* in the first sentence of the first page of the first book of the Bible. "In the beginning God [*Elohim*] created the heavens of the earth" (Genesis 1:1). IN fact, Yahweh is the *Elohim* of *elohim* — the God of gods (Deuteronomy 10:17; Joshua 22:22; Psalms 136:2). He is the Supreme Being. He is the God Who is above all other so-called gods.

Psalms 96:5

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD [Yahweh] made the heavens.

I Corinthians 8:4-6

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him.

Yahweh is the supreme *Elohim*, the only true God, the source of all existence, and the sustainer of everything. However, there is considerable question over the word "*elohim*" because it has a plural form. Many believe that since *elohim* is plural, God must have some inherent plurality.

In order for a Hebrew noun to be a numerical plural, three criteria must be met: 1) the word must have a plural ending, 2) the verb used must be plural, and 3) the adjective(s) used with it must be plural. The word "*elohim*" does have a plural ending. In Hebrew, the suffix "im" works like "s" or "es" in English. In addition, many times *elohim* is used with a plural verb and a plural adjective. In these cases, *elohim* is translated "gods" and has a plural meaning. However, virtually every time when *elohim* is used of the God of Israel, Yahweh, it is accompanied by a singular verb and/or a singular adjective. When this is the case, *elohim* is understood to be a singular noun but with an intensified meaning (i.e., instead of "God," "great God"). When referring to a single individual, it expresses plenitude of power not plurality. If *elohim* were plural, it would lead to a literal translation of Genesis 1:1 being "In the beginning Gods created the heavens and earth." This would lead one to the conclusion that there are multiple gods, not that there is only one God who exists in plurality of persons, as Trinitarian doctrine teaches. It would suggest one person in three gods, not one God in three persons (because the singular personal pronoun and singular verb are used). Consider the following

definitions taken from a couple of well-respected Bible dictionaries.

Elohim "is used, as an ordinary plural, of heathen gods, or of supernatural beings (I Samuel 28:13), or even of earthly judges (Psalms 82:1, 6; John 10:34); but when used of the One God, it takes a singular verb. As so used, it has been thought to be a relic of pre-historic polytheism, but more probably it is a 'plural of majesty' such as is common in Hebrew, or else it denotes the *fullness* of God" (Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, ed. James Hastings, 2001, p. 299)

Some Christians have explained the plural as an anticipation of the Trinity. But again, without a commonly used singular no one in OT times could have developed trinitarian ideas from the word alone. The plural would suggest polytheism more readily than trinitarianism were it not for hints other than the word itself being used with a singular verb....The plural form is better understood as indicating a plenitude of power. Though the etymology is obscure, the word may have come from a root meaning "strong." (Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology, ed. Harrison, Bromiley, Henry, 2000, p.239.)

These dictionaries agree that *elohim* when used of Yahweh is plural not in multiplicity but in majesty or plenitude. Thus, Yahweh is not just God, but He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords; the great, the mighty, and the awesome God (Deuteronomy 10:17).

"It also needs to be stated most emphatically that *elohim* either refers to more than one god, or to

some kind of majestic way of referring to one god (whether Israel's God or another god). There is no 'third option' where *elohim* refers to some mysterious 'plurality in one god'. That is a fantasy inspired by a desire to see the historic Christian conception of God within the Tanakh [Old Testament]. It has absolutely no linguistic basis. Anyone who so insists is simply not schooled in the Hebrew language." - from *The God of the Hebrew Bible and His Relationship to Jesus*, Lindsey Killian & Dr. Laura Emily Palik, 2005, p.11.

The term "*elohim*" is often used of pagan gods in both the plural and singular sense. An example of *elohim* in reference to multiple pagan gods: "...against all the gods [*elohim*] of Egypt I will execute judgments — I am the LORD [Yahweh]" (Exodus 12:12). As an example of *elohim* in reference to a singular god: Ashtoreth is the *elohim* of the Sidonians, Chemosh is the *elohim* of Moab, Milcom is the *elohim* of the sons of Ammon, and Dagon is the *elohim* of the Philistines (I Kings 11:33; Judges 16:23). The only way to tell if *elohim* is plural or singular is by the adjective or verb used with it. No one has suggested that Chemosh had some plurality of persons or that Dagon was a compound unity. It is clear that these gods are each individual and specific to a particular nation.

Several times in the Hebrew Scriptures, humans are also called *elohim*.

Gen 23:6 Abraham is called an *elohim* prince
 Ex 4:16 Yahweh tells Moses that he will function as *elohim* to Aaron
 Ex 7:1 Yahweh tells Moses that he is *elohim* to Pharaoh

Ex 21:6 Judge called *elohim* when master brings slaves to him
 Ex 22:8,9 Judge called *elohim* (3X) when presiding over cases of theft
 I Sam 2:25 Judge called *elohim* when he is mediating between two parties
 Ps 82:1,6 Wicked rulers called *elohim* by God

See also - Ps 45:1,6; 58:1; compare Ps 8:5 to Heb 2:7; compare Ps 97:7 to Heb 1:6.

How is it possible to call humans "gods" without compromising the belief that Yahweh is God, and there is no other (Isaiah 45:22)? The first definition in a Hebrew lexicon under "*elohim*" says: "rulers, judges, either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power" (Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, 2000, p.43). Therefore, the people mentioned above were not infringing on Yahweh's deity; rather, they were representing Him to the people. The judges were to act as God's appointed decision makers on earth; they received the Word of God and delivered it to the people (John 10:34-36). They were directly accountable to God, and when they made poor judgments, they were punished by Him (Psalm 82). They were not independent *elohim* but extensions of the great *Elohim*.

There are even some obscure usages of *elohim* where it functions as an adjective. These may seem unusual, but they offer insight into understanding the word.

Gen 30:8 "with *elohim* wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister"
 Ex 9:28 "Entreat Yahweh that there be no more *elohim* thunderings"
 I Sam 14:15 "the earth quaked so that it became an *elohim* trembling"

Jonah 3:3 Nineveh was an "*elohim* great city, a three days walk"

These instances demonstrate how flexible the term *elohim* really is. The definition in each of these cases is "mighty" or "strong." Thus, *elohim* refers either to one or more beings [God(s), angel(s), human(s)], or to something that is immense (a struggle, a city, mountains, etc.).

The New Testament equivalent of "*elohim*" is "*theos*." Although the overwhelming majority of uses of *theos* are in reference to either the Father or false gods, there are several texts in which *theos* is used differently:

II Cor 4:4 Satan is referred to as the *theos* of this age
 John 10:34,35 Jesus referred to the judges as "*theos* to whom the word of *theos* came..."
 Heb 1:8,9 Jesus is called *theos*, and also has *Theos* over him
 John 20:28 Thomas called Jesus "My Lord and my *theos*!"

Satan can be referred to as god because he functions in the role of god — he has dominion over the nations of this age (Luke 4:5 and 6; Revelation 11:15). The judges were called gods because they had represented God's authority to the people. Jesus is called god twice in the New Testament (Hebrews 1:8; John 20:28) because he has been elevated "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:20 and 21). Thus, Jesus is god (*theos/elohim*), but he is not God. He is God's supreme representative to humanity and the one invested with all authority (Matthew 28:18). "Christ is the very

'exegesis' [or explanation] of the Father, and indeed himself *theos*, because **as a man** he is utterly transparent to *another*; who is greater than himself and indeed than all" (*The Human Face of God*, John A. T. Robinson, 1973, p,189-190).