

INTERPRETATIVE PROBLEMS IN PSALM 82

Difficult Texts in the OT: A Workshop Approach, IBR 2023

מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף¹

A psalm of Asaph

אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֶת-אֱלֹהִים

בְּקִרְבַּ אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט:

¹ God has taken his place in the divine council;

In the midst of **gods** (NIV: “gods”; NASB: rulers) he holds judgement:

1. Who are the *elohim*?

- Judges in Israel?
- Kings of the nations?
- Non-divine heavenly beings?
- Gods of the nations?
- Multiple referents?

עַד-מָתַי תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ-עוֹלָם

וּפְנֵי רָשָׁעִים תִּשְׁאוּ-סִלָּה:

² “How long will you judge unjustly

and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

שִׁפְטוּ-דָל וְיִתּוֹם

עֵי וְרֵשַׁע הַצְּדִיקוֹ:

³ Give justice to the poor and the orphan;

Uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute.

פְּלֹטוּ-דָל וְאֶבְיוֹן

מִיַּד רָשָׁעִים הַצְּלִילוּ:

⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;

Deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

2. Who has no knowledge?

- The wicked?
- The vulnerable?
- The *elohim*?

לֹא יִדְעוּ | וְלֹא יִבִּינוּ

בְּחֹשֶׁכָה יִתְהַלְּכוּ

יִמוּטוּ כָּל-מִוְסְדֵי אָרֶץ:

⁵ **They** (NIV: the ‘gods’) have neither knowledge nor understanding,

they walk around in darkness;

all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

אֲנִי-אֶמְרָתִי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם

וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן כְּלֶכֶם:

⁶ **I say** (NIV, ESV, NASB: said; CEB: hereby declare), “You are gods (NIV: ‘gods’),

children of the Most High, all of you;

אֲכֹן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן

וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְלוּ:

⁷ nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,

and fall like any prince.”

3. What is God doing with his words?

- Issuing a verdict?
- Drawing a conclusion about deity?

קוּמָה אֱלֹהִים שִׁפְטָה הָאָרֶץ

כִּי-אַתָּה תִּנְחַל בְּכָל-הַגּוֹיִם:

⁸ Rise up, O God, judge the earth;

for all the nations **belong to** you (ESV, JPS: shall inherit)!

(NRSV)

4. What is happening with the nations?

- Possessed or inherited?
- Reapportioned?

Selected Bibliography

- Handy, Lowell K. "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 51-66.
Handy analyzes various poetic devices, such as parallelism and wordplay, arguing that the poem is a chiasm of five sections, all depicting God judging the gods.
- Machinist, Peter. "How Gods Die, Biblically and Otherwise: A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring." Pages 189-240 in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*. Edited by Beate Pongratz-Leisten. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011.
Machinist argues that the elohim are deities who are demoted from deity and actually brought lower than humanity because they lack the two marks of divinity: knowledge (5a) and immortality (7a), the former of which humans gained in Gen 3.
- McClellan, Daniel. "The Gods-Complaint: Psalm 82 as a Psalm of Complaint," *JBL* 137/4 (2018): 833-851.
McClellan approaches Ps 82 from a form-critical perspective, arguing that the identification of the psalm as a complaint psalm from YHWH against the gods helps to reconcile interpretative difficulties.
- Moberly, R. W. L. "Justice and the Recognition of the True God: A Reading of Psalm 82." *RB* 127/2 (2020): 215-236.
Moberly reads Ps 82 as an "imaginative poem" that defines one of the essential characteristics of deity: justice.
- Mongé-Greer, Erica. *Divine Council, Ethics, & Resistance in Psalm 82*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023.
In her published dissertation, Mongé-Greer explores Psalm 82 through exegetical, comparative-historical, and ethical lenses.
- Niehr, H. "Götter oder Menschen – eine falsche Alternative. Bemerkungen zu Ps 82." *ZAW* 99 (1987): 94-98.
As the title suggests, Niehr considers both the gods and their earthly counterparts to be in view in this psalm, arguing that the poet is making an analogy between the heavenly and earthly realms of gods and humanity.
- Prinsloo, Willem S. "Psalm 82: Once Again, God or Men?" *Biblica* 76/2 (1995): 219-228.
Prinsloo offers a helpful poetic analysis, arguing that the rhetorical structure of the psalm serves to highlight God as superior over the gods who fail to rule the earth justly.
- Santrac, Dragoslava. "God and 'Gods' – Poetic Ambiguity and Wordplay: A Proposal towards a Better Understanding of Ps 82," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27/1 (2016): 37-54.
Santrac focuses on the identity of the elohim, laying out the interpretive options, and arguing that the poet is using deliberate ambiguity to expose the deceptiveness of the "gods."
- Schnutzer, Andrew J. "Yahweh among the Gods: The Trial for Justice in Psalm 82." Pages 222-245 in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*. Eds. David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schnutzer.
Paying close attention to its canonical context within the Asaph collection, Schnutzer argues that Psalm 82 continues the focus on YHWH's supremacy over international deities, who failed to uphold justice for the oppressed.
- Strawn, Brent A. "The Poetics of Psalm 82: Three Critical Notes along with a Plea for the Poetic," *RB* 121/1 (2014): 21-46.
Trying to redirect the conversation from historical to poetical issues, Strawn focuses on the interpretative crises in vv. 5, 6, and 8 (#2-4 on the front side of this handout).
- Trotter, James M. "Death of the **אֱלֹהִים** in Psalm 82," *JBL* 131/2 (2012): 221-239.
According to Trotter, Psalm 82 depicts YHWH as a participant in El's divine council. He argues that the interpretation of the elohim as human kings who were regarded as divine does the most justice to the description in vv. 2-4 and the parallel texts in the HB, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia.