

Why is ‘Elohim plural?

Or

Is there such a thing as monotheism?

By

Eric Thompson

Abstract

It is very common these days for commentators on religion to characterize monotheism as chauvinistic, imperialistic, and generally responsible for much of the violence, torture, and misery in the world. That this criticism is at least partially valid is certain. In this exposition, I will survey the term $\sim yhla$ in the TaNaK, and the history of its interpretation as an equivalent to the Tetragrammaton (YHWH, Ha-Shem). Then I will trace the term to its earliest expression in the ancient Levant, and make a cross-cultural glance at other cultures’ terms for the divine world, concluding that terms like “monotheism” and “polytheism” are probably just bad descriptions of the divine world most people, including the ancient authors of the Bible envision.

1. The interpretation as an equivalent to the Tetragrammaton (YHWH, Ha-Shem).

Usually it is “explained” as 1) a plural “of majesty”, or that 2) G-d is condescendingly including the angles in self address like a parent to small children, or 3) the Christian standby: the Trinity. A common understanding of the whole biblical tradition in its final form is that *YHWH*, *‘elohim*, *‘El*, *Shadday*, and combinations thereof, are simply different names for the same singular entity. One hears the claim that when *‘elohim* refers to the “true” G-d, it goes with singular verbs, adjectives and pronouns. But this is simply not true of the Bible. It usually is, but there are quite a few exceptions.

(Exodus Rabbah 3:6: I am YHWH when expressing mercy and *‘elohim* when expressing judgement.)

None of these ‘explanations make sense of the actual reality of the ink on the papyrus. That is to say, that it is evident, I think, that this is not what authors of any particular piece of the Bible had in mind at the time and in the context they were composing what was to become Biblical literature.

2. The term $\sim yhla$ in the TaNaK

A. Linguistic Considerations:

‘elohim is a frozen plural form for which Hebrew authors invented a singular form—*‘eloah*, which is found mostly in the book of Job. It is a generic designation which can be articular (*ha-‘elohim*, as often in Qohelet), and can be grammatically plural or singular. In theologically key passages, the collectivity inherent in the plural form often manifests as grammatical confusion, clauses and phrases bouncing back and forth between singular and plural. This is most evident in Gen 1:26-28. For similar example of the conceptual confusion expressed in inconsistent grammatical forms, see Hosea 11:1-3. Note in both passages both terms (pronouns, verbs and nouns) referring to G-d and those referring to the human subjects (*‘adam* = humanity

in Gen, Israel in Hosea) bounce randomly between singular and plural in the Hebrew text. A very interesting breakdown of the usual ‘*elohim* + singular verb when Israel’s G-d is referred to is **II Sam 7:23**: ~yhla Wklh (referent: YHWH). Note singular pronominal suffixes—cf Gen 1:26-29 wyhla ~iyowG (Heb: nations and its gods; KJV: nations and their gods—grammatical fix).

B. Conceptual Patterns, Detected (Theology)

Different inner-Biblical traditions differ in their understanding and application of the terms for the divine being and realm. The Deuteronomistic tradition, the traditional designated by scholars since Wellhausen as “J”, and the distinct tradition called “P” all have different understandings. Various prophets add to the diversity within the Biblical conversation. I will focus make some observations that mostly concern the P tradition. The P tradition runs through the Torah, comprising substantial sections of Genesis, Exodus, most of Leviticus, and Numbers, but is also associated with Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

“In contrast to Deuteronomistic conceptions, which insist on the strict separation between the people of Yhwh and other peoples, the members of these priestly circles put forward an inclusive monotheism, which tries to define the place and role of Israel and of Yhwh among all the peoples and their respective gods. To this end, the priests used a theory of the divine names to develop a system of ‘three circles’ or three stages of the revelation of Yhwh.” (Römer 225)

a. *‘elohim*. To all humanity at the time of creation and flood (Gen 1-10, P sections)

“Because the name *‘elohim* is at the same time both a singular and a plural, in a sense all the gods can be seen as a manifestation of the one God. For the members of these priestly circles, this means that all the people[s] who worship a creator god are actually, without knowing it, worshipping the god who will manifest himself later to Israel under the name Yhwh.” (Römer 226) In other words, P uses *‘elohim* in a universal sense prior as appropriate for designating the deity/deities at the creation before there was an Abrahamic family or an Israel.

b. *El-Shadday* To the Patriarchs (**Ex 6:2** theory; examples: **Gen 17:1**—YHWH appeared as El-Shaddai to Abraham; **Gen 28:3**—Isaac—“May El Shadday bless you”; **Gen 35:11**

—Elohim appeared to Jacob, “I am El-Shadday”; Israel blesses his sons by El Shaddai in **Gen 43:14**; Jacob to Joseph: El-Shadday appeared to me in Luz and blessed me, **Gen 48:3**, and **Gen 49:25**.

Regarding El Shadday, “. . . by using this name, the authors of the ‘priestly writings’ claim that the god who revealed himself to Abraham was also the one known to Ishmael, the first son of Abraham and the ancestor of the Ishmaelites. In referring to ‘El Shadday,’ the priestly editors make use of a name they knew was archaic, but that at the time was still used for a god venerated in Arabia.” (Römer 226)

Note: El Shadday (var. Shadday) appears 9 times in the Torah: 7 times in P’s version of the Patriarchs, and TWICE in the Balaam story (Num 24: 4, 16; see below)

Otherwise it appears twice in Ruth (1:20, 21) in the mouth of archaizing Naomi, and 31 times in Job (also, self-consciously archaizing—located in the Transjordan)

Twice in **Psalms; 68:14, 91:1**

Four times in the Prophets: **Isaiah 13:6; Ezek 1:24, 10:5; Joel 1:5**

g. *YHWH* to Moses alone, and through him to Israel

“This is the sole privilege of Israel, which is thereby put into a position to worship this god properly. However, Israel is not permitted to derive an inappropriate ‘profit’ from this knowledge, so during the second part of the Persian era, a prohibition is gradually elaborated on pronouncing the name of Yhwh.” (Römer 226) This is an interesting take on the prohibition of pronouncing YHWH.

Much of the later literature of the prophets and Ketuvim maintain a distinction between YHWH and ‘*elohim*. The former is known only to Israelites, the later, usual in the full on plural form, is known to all people. Sometimes, the superior status of YHWH over other ‘*elohim* is envisioned (Jonah 1-2—a conversion?). But interestingly, sometimes really not:

II Chron 35:20-22 adds an episode to its version of the reign of Josiah, not in the Kings version: Josiah engages in military opposition again Necho, Pharaoh of Egypt; Necho tells Josiah to stand down because . . . yMi[-rva ~yhlaem . . . rma ~yhla but Josiah pays no heed, proceeds and dies in battle; the biblical narrator tells us

~yhla yPim owk>n yer>biD-l<a [m:[aol>w

A polytheistic king tells a devout *ha-shem* worshipper that he is commissioned from *'elohim*, and the biblical narrator backs him up, and frames the whole affair in Hebrew, omitting the inevitable detail that the Pharaoh had to have employed interpreters, employing the plural *'elohim* as the subject of the singular verb *'amar*.

The Council of El

'Elohim in the Council of 'El: Psalm 29:1-2; Psalm 82; 89:6;

Common Biblical Image of The Prophet: One made privy to the conversations of the divine council

I Kings 22:17-23—Micaiah ben Imlah; Isaiah 6:1-8; etc.

3. The Context of the Ancient Levant

A. The Ugaritic Library

'El, bene-'El, 'ilm (= 'elohim); Divine Council (m`d = Heb d[wm)

“Aloud they summon the Assembly of the gods (qbs.ilm)

The Assembly of El they summon.” (Ba`al III:2-4 in Parker 88)

B. The Deir Alla Plaster Inscription, ca 800 BCE (Lipinski 116)

Balaam ben/bar Be'or the dude

~[lb = bl' (proto-Semitic/Arabic bilag meaning “eloquent”) plus memation (cf Milcom)

rw[b = Camel in Epigraphic Arabian

King of Edom in Gen 36:32 is rw[b !b [l<b —exactly Balaam's name without memation.

Location

Numbers 22: 5 identifies him as hrwtp. Deut 23:5 (v. 4 Eng) glosses this as an otherwise unknown place name in Northern Mesopotamia (*mipetor 'aram naharaym*). Following this error, the Masoretes pointed the word in Numbers 22:5 p'torah as a place name. The Peshitta, Vulgate, and Palestinian Targum correctly see it as pātôrā, “interpreter” (or oracles and dreams). P-T-R in

both Hebrew and Aramaic) is a technical term for interpreting dreams (only occurring in the Bible in Genesis 40 and 41 of Joseph's dream interpretations.

The Samaritan Torah of Numbers 22:5, Balaam's residence is "on the river, in the country of the sons of Ammon." The reading of Ammon here is also attested in the Peshitta and Vulgate as well as several Hebrew mss. In the standard MT, however, the nun has been dropped from the word `ammon (!wM[) leaving wM["his people," which is very awkward as a geographical designation (Lipinski 111). The conclusion? The Balaam of Numbers 22-24 is the same person as the Balaam of the Dier Alla inscription and located by the Biblical tradition as indigenous to the very place the inscription was found, i.e. the mid-northern Transjordanian region, in the territory of Biblical Ammon, near the Jabbok and Jordan rivers.

1. "Warning of the Book of Balaam (~[lb), bar Be'or. He was a man seeing the gods (Aram: !ihla), and the gods came to him at night, and they disclosed to him
2. the very instruction of 'El, and they said to Balaam, bar Be'or, thus: "His pledger approached to pierce; the fire approached his hut".
3. And Balaam arose in the morning . . .
5. [he] said to them, "Sit down! I shall tell you what the Shaddayn (Aram: !yDv) have sworn. And come, see the deeds of the gods (*'elahin*). The gods have gathered,
6. and the Shaddayn have set up an assembly, and they said to Shamash, "May you smash the bolts of heaven . . .

Numbers 22-24 contains the story of Bil'am (Balaam) including an oracle of Bil'am

24:3 Oracle of Bil'am, ben Be'or; Oracle of a man of the open eye;

4 Oracle of the one hearing the words of El; Who sees the visions of Shadday

Falling down eyes uncovered

- It is clear that the inscription and the Biblical tale have the same person in mind.
- The correspondence of terms, themes and ideas strongly suggest a common verbal tradition, perhaps written.
- It tends to confirm the dating of the writing of the bulk of earliest parts of the Torah and the Former Prophets

- It shows that the basic conceptual world and terminology of the Biblical divine world and prophecy is shared as a common cultural feature of the time and place.

4. A Cross-Cultural Glance at other Cultures' Terms for the Divine World

- A. Christianity: Trinity, Theotokon (Mary is the 'Mother of God'), Angels, Demons and Saints
- B. Islam: Elaborate Angelology and Djinn, depicted in narrative as *de facto* autonomous
- B. South African San: Sky God, God, Mother God, gods, ancestors, even trickster, all used interchangeably

5. Conclusion

Terms like "monotheism" and "polytheism" are probably just bad descriptions of the divine world most people, including the ancient authors of the Bible envision. In all actual examples on the ground, polytheism and monotheism bleed into each other and are sometimes, in many historical-cultural circumstances, apparently transferable. At least some Biblical authors, including that of Bereshit chapter 1, used "Elohim" as a means of commonality and universalistic comradery with people of other religions. 'Elohim was the divine idiom of inclusion and generality in contrast to YHWH which was the idiom of particularity. By using 'Elohim, particularly in contexts of Israelite characters mixing with people of other nations, the authors were in a way embracing them.

Works Cited

- Lipinski, Edward. 1994. *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters.
- Parker, Simon B. Ed. 1997. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Römer, Thomas. 2015. *The Invention of God*. Trans. Raymond Guess. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Further Study

Satlow, Michael L. 2014. *How The Bible Became Holy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Schniedewind, William M. 2013. *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic*

Period. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Smith, Mark S. 2001. *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Der Toorn, Karel. 2007. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible.* Cambridge:
Harvard University Press.