

## Is Psalm 82 depicting actual gods?

By BNONN TENNANT on AUGUST 2, 2019  
II minutes to read

*TL;DR: yes, but accusing someone who believes this of polytheism or liberalism is semantic mischief.*

God stands in the divine council;  
    he holds judgment in the midst of the gods:  
“How long will you judge unjustly  
    and lift up the faces of the wicked?  
Judge on behalf of the weak and the fatherless;  
    vindicate the afflicted and the destitute.  
Rescue the helpless and the needy;  
    deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”  
They neither know nor care—  
    they stumble in darkness;  
    all the foundations of the earth are shaken.  
I, I have said, “You are gods,  
    sons of the Most High, all of you.  
Yet you will die like man,  
    and you will fall like any other prince.”  
Rise up, O God—judge the earth,  
    for you shall inherit all the nations. (Psalm 82)

Some Christians are unwilling—put mildly—to interpret Psalm 82 as referring to spiritual beings. Perhaps because it is such a useful nexus for understanding the divine council in the redemptive history of God’s kingdom, it tends to be the passage most strongly attacked when divine council theology is being disputed. The counterargument is that the *elohim* here are actually human judges or kings, metaphorically called gods, or given this title as some kind of appellative or honorific.

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How should we assess this?

Before we look at the text, the most significant problem is not actually exegetical—though there are certainly problems there. Rather, it is the unstated assumption that if Psalm 82 is speaking of human rulers then the entire concept of the divine council unravels, along with its place in the narrative of God’s kingdom. But this is obviously absurd. You can’t refute an expansive stream of biblical theology by doing a word study on one passage that feeds it. Neither the case for believing in spiritual rulers in the heavenly places, nor the case for their redemptive-historical trajectory, rides on Psalm 82. If this psalm were removed from the canon, nothing significant would change. We could still easily prove the divine council in Scripture, and we could still certainly piece together its redemptive-historical arc.

That said, it’s helpful to be prepared, so I will below give the general form of this objection, and then suggest a number of ways to respond. Here is how one Reformed correspondent put it to me:

These verses (and remember they are poetry) must be and are saying: “You men have been exercising God-like functions—judging and ruling, you think of yourselves as gods, and I agree that you are behaving as though you were gods, but ‘like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.’” This alone makes sense of the passage.

“LIKE GODS” OR JUST GODS?

The first thing to note is the weaseling away from what the text actually says. This is not exegesis, which starts by analyzing the actual words; it is eisegesis, in which a pre-prepared interpretive gloss is quickly applied over the top of the actual words, to sanitize and neutralize them.

God does not merely agree that these rulers are *behaving like* gods; he declares that they *are* gods—and not merely gods, but sons:

I, I have said you are gods,  
sons of the Most High all of you (v. 6).

Could this mean that Yahweh has assigned them the appellatives “gods” and “sons” owing to their ruling in his stead? Possibly. Could it mean that he is merely agreeing that they are *acting* like gods and sons? That is exceedingly awkward. Certainly neither interpretation is self-evident; quite the opposite. To make this case, divine council opponents have to actually *argue*; and to do that, they must shoulder a huge burden of proof:

#### I. THEY MUST SHOW THAT THE COUNCIL OF VERSE 1 IS A COUNCIL OF MEN

But the Hebrew *adat el* is a known cognate of the Ugaritic phrase *‘dt ‘ilm*, which was the term used in Canaan of the congregation of the gods; not of human rulers. Perhaps Psalm 82 is seeking to correct this usage, but if so, we should find clear evidence in the rest of the psalm to overturn their identification as divine beings and present them instead as human rulers—which we do not.

Moreover, a council of men is baffling on its own terms. Who are these men, and where are they located, such that God is standing in their midst? This is explicitly an *international* council; “all the foundations of the *eretz*” are shaken by their terrible rulership. Although *eretz* can just mean “land,” in this case it is paralleled with the nations:

Rise up, O God, judge the **earth**  
Because you shall inherit all the **nations**. (v. 8)

There can be no doubt, therefore, that this is an international council. But such a thing does not even exist today in the way described, let alone during the time of Israel! If it's a poetic device, it is an opaque one without parallel in Jewish thought. By contrast, a council of divine beings who ruled the nations is attested repeatedly in both Jewish and wider religious texts. So this attempted explanation is like suggesting that a news report about the president speaking from the White House isn't referring to Donald Trump speaking from his residence in D.C., but to another unknown, possibly metaphorical president speaking from an unknown, possibly poetic house that also happens to be white.

## II. THEY MUST SHOW SCRIPTURE USING THE TERMS ELOHIM AND BENEY ELOHIM TO REFER TO MEN

But *is* there anywhere in the Hebrew Bible—or the wider contemporary literature—where this is the case?

*Elohim* never refers to men. It always refers to spiritual beings; that is, in fact, the very thing that circumscribes its semantic range! Divine council opponents will sometimes appeal to Exodus 21:6; 22:8, but there is no compelling reason to translate *elohim* as semantically plural in these instances. “God” is the simplest reading, and indeed the only obvious one—aside from a circular requirement to find precedent for Psalm 82. The consistent usage of the Hebrew Bible is that *elohim* refers (exclusively, and with some diversity) to residents of the spirit world; never to living human beings.

The plural *benei elohim*, “sons of God” and its variations, is a term of art in Scripture, also never used of human beings. True—people are sometimes called God's sons (*e.g.*, 2 Samuel 7:14), but the specific plural wording, *benei elohim*, is not used on those occasions—precisely because it was a term of art, a religious meme referring to the divine council. Some would argue that it is used of human spirits in Job 1 and 2, but even if we grant that in the teeth of the evidence, that interpretation runs aground when it hits Psalm 82. Consider the implications:

1. **Deceased human spirits are rulers over the nations from heaven.** This is an awkward position for someone to take while simultaneously objecting to angelic spirits being rulers over the nations from heaven!
2. **Deceased human spirits judge wickedly from heaven.** Needless to say, this is incoherent on any orthodox soteriology—humans in heaven do not sin, because they are like God (1 John 3:2 etc). You cannot enter heaven, but then lose it again.
3. **Deceased human spirits are sentenced to die.** This is again embarrassing nonsense. How can God say, “you will die like men” when they have *already* died? And if this is the second death, how can they be subject to it as his redeemed people in heaven?

### III. THEY MUST MAKE SENSE OF JESUS’ APPEAL TO PSALM 82 IN JOHN 10:34–39

Seeing the losing case for a word studies approach here, divine council opponents will typically try to short-circuit the exegetical problems by appealing to Jesus’ own interpretation of Psalm 82 in John 10. But this fumbles the clear reading of what Jesus, and his audience, actually think:

The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.”

Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. (John 10:31–39)

Jesus' argument here is an a fortiori one—probably his favorite form of inference. If we lay it out syllogistically, it would look roughly like this:

1. God himself calls lesser divine beings gods and makes them adoptive sons of the Most High (Psalm 82:6);
2. Jesus is not merely an adopted son; he is in the Father, and the Father is in him (John 10:38);
3. Therefore, how much more a son and how much more equal with God is he.

On the other hand, if you take the word of God to have come to human beings in Psalm 82, then the argument runs aground:

4. God himself calls human rulers gods and makes them adoptive sons of the Most High (Psalm 82:6);
5. Jesus is not merely an adopted son; he is in the Father, and the Father is in him (John 10:38);
6. Therefore, how much more a son and how much more equal with God is he.

The problem here is that the connection between (4) to (5) is fatally equivocal. Under this interpretation, the term “gods” is honorific; it is an appellative that doesn't denote a divine role or non-human ontology. But the Jews' outrage is prompted precisely because the claims Jesus is making *are* about role and ontology. This interpretation has him justifying his claim to divinity on the basis of an honorific title that can be applied to any man—which is an obvious non sequitur.

The fact that the Jews again seek to stone him after hearing this argument is ample demonstration that they did not interpret Psalm 82 as referring to human beings, nor Jesus as saying, in effect, “Cool it guys, we're all gods here.” Rather, they see him as doubling down on what they suppose is blasphemy. The repeated emphasis in John is on Jesus' divinity as the Word of God, so we should expect Jesus to amplify, rather than downplay or backpedal, his claim to divinity. Which is more likely in view of Jesus' mission and John's theological focus: that we should understand him to be *emptying* the term gods of so much

import that it can be applied even to his unbelieving audience—or *using* its import to expand and justify his own claim to godhood? The former is obviously 180 degrees from what we should expect. It is unsurprising, then, that the human interpretation makes no sense of Jesus' argument, nor his opponents' response.

#### IV. THEY MUST MAKE SENSE OF MEN DYING LIKE MEN

A final rejoinder at this point, as the lines of argument run dry, is that gods cannot die—so even if the human council interpretation of Psalm 82 is poor, the divine council alternative is incoherent in light of verse 7:

However, you will die like man [or men],  
and you will fall like one of the princes.

I think this objection arises only on the spur of the moment, because if you take the time to think it through, it actually obliterates the human council interpretation. Consider: God says that, despite his declaring these beings to be gods, they will nonetheless die like man and fall like any prince. This contrast only works if there *is* a contrast; *i.e.*, if these gods are *greater* than the typical prince, and if it is *unnatural* for them to die like man. What possible sense does it make to tell men that they will die like men, or princes that they will fall like princes? Such an interpretation turns the psalmist into a rhetorical dunce with no competence in his craft.

While men dying like men makes no sense at all, gods dying like men certainly does. Confusion only arises if we ignore the theology of death articulated in Scripture, and think of it in purely biological terms. But in the Bible, death is not primarily a *biological* event; it is a *relational* one. Biology is incidental: death itself is separation from God's benevolence, and exposure to his wrath. The very first time we see death, in Genesis 2:16–17, God solemnly promises it to Adam and Eve should they eat from the tree. He neither lied nor changed his mind—they *did* die on the day they ate, as presupposed by Paul in Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13 etc. Death simply isn't biological at root.

The first death was in Eden; the second death is in the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). *Neither* of these is biological. To the contrary, the second death involves eternal biological *life*.

Now, here's the kicker: Jesus in Matthew 25:41 explicitly states that this lake of fire, this second *death*, is prepared for the devil and his angels—some of whom are the very beings addressed in Psalm 82. If the lake of fire is explicitly described as (i) death, and (ii) originally for wicked spiritual beings, then the judgment of Psalm 82 makes explicit sense when applied to wicked spiritual beings!

So Psalm 82:7 does not require us think that biological death is in view; rather, it is establishing a contrast between these gods' status (v. 6) and their punishment (v. 7). The parallelism emphasizes that their fate will be the same as that of men. It is an ironic reversal—indeed, an allusion to the original ironic reversal in Genesis 3:14–15. By failing to fulfill the role of divinity, these beings are made lower than the men they were supposed to rule. Just as Satan does not eat literal dust in Genesis 3:14, and just as he is not brought down into a literal pit in Isaiah 14:15, so these gods are not literally killed in Psalm 82:6–7. The point is much like that in Isaiah 14—indeed, the language of “falling” is even the same:

**How you have fallen from heaven,** O morning star, son of dawn!

You are cut down to the ground, conqueror of nations!

And you said in your heart,

“I will ascend to heaven;

I will raise up my throne above the stars of God;

and I will sit on the mountain of assembly

on the summit of Tsaphon;

I will ascend to the high places of the clouds,

I will make myself like the Most High.”


**But you are brought down to Sheol,**


to the far reaches of the pit. (Isaiah 14:12–15)



To be brought down to Sheol, of course, is to be brought down to the grave, to the underworld. It is a metaphor for biological death when applied to human beings. Yet we do not think that Isaiah is therefore teaching that Satan dies in that sense; nor do we suppose the passage can only be speaking of a human king, and *not* of Satan. For the same reason, it strains Psalm 82:7 to take the judgment of death as strictly biological. It is referring, rather, to the gods faring no better than human rulers who are weak and mortal, who cannot rule forever.

#### REFERENCES (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)


1. [Michael S. Heiser,  Does Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible Demonstrate an Evolution From Polytheism to Monotheism in Israelite Religion? <<http://jesot.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/JESOT-I.I-Heiser.pdf>>, *JESOT I.I* (2012).]

 15 comments



Unless as missed it as I was skimming the article, you never define what you mean by actual gods.


STEVE HAYS

 August 2nd, 2019 <<https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43389>>



Put another way, while you systematically explain what you don't think it means (process of elimination), you don't discuss the ontological status of the "actual gods" in this passage. What's their nature? In what respect are they designated "gods"? (Unless that got past me.)

STEVE HAYS

 August 2nd, 2019 <<https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43390>>



Well, met, Bnonn. While one can squint and see human rulers here, I don't see how one could read this in light of the rest of the Hebrew Bible as only metaphorically referring to human beings as Elohim.

ANDREW

SCHUMACHE

<HTTP://BEG

As you point out, we do see a human king being addressed metaphorically, but the real second person in Isaiah 14 is a spiritual being. When the metaphor happens at all, it happens the other way round, and we recognize the human ruler to be the one only figuratively addressed, and the spiritual ruler is the one that is real.

[🔗 August 3rd, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43394>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43394)



This is an oversight caused by turning a book appendix into an article ;p They are archangels.

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[🔗 August 3rd, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43406>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43406)



GW

I think Heiser's done a good job on this topic, yet for now he's not been able to convince those who've been taught differently their whole lives. But as the younger generations begin to assume more responsibility in the churches and seminaries, we'll see a shift in thinking on this topic. If I were to summarize a thesis it would be this: Elohim are real, and are a key (spiritual) influence on the world.

With that in mind, what's your thinking on this topic as it relates to the letters in Revelation 2-3? Each message is not directed to each church specifically, but rather to each angel\* of the churches ("To the angel of the church in Ephesus write"). This has obvious

parallels to Old Testament divine council themes. In both instances, divine beings are being judged by the LORD for where they have failed. Of course in Revelation 2-3 it is clear that these messages also apply to those in the churches, yet much in these letters could reasonably be seen messages to God's angels waging spiritual warfare (Rev. 2:13). Since our primary battle is spiritual (Eph. 6:12), it makes sense that the Lord Jesus would also be giving direction to spiritual beings. There is also a parallelism between both worlds. The spiritual battle on earth pictures the battle in the heavenlies (Rev. 12:7). And what happens in heaven has an effect on the affairs of man (Rev. 12:17). Is the church missing a large portion of the Bible by downplaying/ignoring the role played by angels?

I'll admit this isn't my idea, but was brought to my attention when an unnamed blogger brought it up to Heiser. To my surprise, Heiser rejected any supernatural explanation as to the reason the letters were addressed to angels, instead choosing to interpret these greetings as poetic metaphors addressing the church(es).

\*The Greek term (angelo) can mean (human) messenger, not just angel, but in the other NT passages its predominant use is that of a divine messenger. I take it as read that these instances in Rev. 2-3 refer to actual angels.


[🔗 August 23rd, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43624>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43624)



I think what you say about heavenly and earthly "linkage" makes sense, but I'm not convinced the angels in Revelation 2-3 are elohim. Maybe they are, but it doesn't seem like an open-and-shut case. The main issue for me is why John would be writing letters to them. How is he to deliver these letters? And why would Jesus not address them directly, like he does in Psalm 82? Earthly letters directed to heavenly beings makes very little sense.

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I also think I know who you're talking about, and he doesn't couch things quite as you have. He is honestly what people rightly refer to as a "nutjob," who has devoted all his energy to the notion that the gospel is for angels too, and the church has been neglecting this critical fact for two millennia. Mike is right to discount him and his exegesis.

 August 23rd, 2019 <<https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43626>>




Yes, that seems to be my memory of that guy as well. Very odd.

GW

Still I cannot shake the idea that the peculiar way the letters are addressed has significance. Clearly these messages are (at the least) intended for seven churches in the late-1st century (as well as the church universally thereafter). We don't need to craft a novel theology to understand them.

To your point, Christ didn't need a physical letter to direct this message to His angels anymore than He needed prophets to write Isaiah 14 or Ezekiel 28 condemning Satan. But how else would we know about Lucifer's fall, lest it be revealed? When the Bible reveals anything, including that of angels and the divine realm, it does so for our benefit (Rom. 15:4). So if these letters are addressed to divine beings which oversee these churches in some way, what does that reveal to us about the spiritual realm?

Not an essential doctrine, but something to ponder. All the best.

 August 23rd, 2019 <<https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43627>>



Good thoughts.

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[🔗 August 23rd, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43629>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43629)



GREG

I applaud the work here, though I disagree with the conclusions. I was speaking to a colleague about this today, and shared the article with him so he'll be able to check it out. One thing he mentioned though is that "Elohim" though often translated as 'gods' (and rightly so), is more literally 'mighty ones' which can certainly be more open ended. A human can be referred to as a 'mighty one'. You did bring my attention to some other relevant passages I'll have to study further. However, I disagree with both interpretations given for the passage where Jesus quotes this Psalm. It seems to me that when the people were appalled had his claim to be the Son of God he simply threw it back at them, "You didn't have a problem with the LORD calling your ancestors 'gods' so why are you so upset with me claiming to be a Son of God?" Of course the reality is he is the only Son of God, but he was pointing out how ridiculous their supposed thinking was, and almost certainly made them do a 'double take'. Such an embarrassing realization no doubt wanted to make them kill him even more.

[🔗 September 12th, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43882>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43882)



Greg, I appreciate you taking the time to comment, but without interacting with my arguments, it's not very interesting to simply re-assert the view I have already taken care to refute.

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That *elohim* can be understood as *mighty ones* or *powerful ones* is of little interest either, since reading any import into that commits a kind of etymological fallacy that ignores its actual usage. As Heiser

documents, it is a term of art that refers specifically to spirit beings. When the Bible wants to speak of *embodied* mighty ones, it uses the term *gibborim*.

[🔗 September 12th, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43891>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43891)



GREG

I'm just not convinced, at least not by these passages. These terms seem like they could go either way, specifically when referring to "sons of God". This appears to be a way of describing those who (at the very least) follow the Lord, and goes all the way to describing his people. If we look at Genesis 7, many people say the "sons of God" has being angelic beings, but Moses is actually signifying a difference that goes all the way back to Seth and Cain – the descendants of Seth followed and obeyed the Lord, hence being known as "sons of God", in contrast to the descendants of Cain who did not – and are described as "daughters of men". It's clear that God didn't want Seth's descendants intermarrying with the ungodly, and so Genesis 7 describes even the "sons of God" as becoming disobedient, leading to everyone becoming unrighteous.

In Romans, Paul also uses similar language when he says, "The Earth groans in anticipation for the sons of God to be revealed." A clear reference to believers, who through Christ have become children of God. This is all consistent in the grand scheme of salvation, where by our sanctification we are becoming more and more like Jesus (God), and therefore can aptly be called "children of God" or even "mighty ones". It's no surprise that the same 'process' occurred to OT Israel, who were also exclusively God's people before Christ, and therefore could also be called 'gods' in the sense that they are children of God.

And as a side note, I think it takes a lot of reading into Isaiah 14, and Ezekiel 37 (maybe have wrong chapter) that these passages are about a fallen angel or Satan. I understand this is where we get our concept of that occurrence, but I was very surprised because

contextually, nothing is given to make us think they are talking about anything other than the powerful earthly king being described. I suppose it could have a double meaning, but I find such arguments to be conjecture at best. I know this causes many problems for what we think we know about the devil. Certainly I still ask myself, “Well, what exactly is The Accuser?” It May be a fallen angel, but those passages specifically just don’t convince me.

At any rate, you’ve given me much to think about, and certainly peeked my curiosity on the Deuteronomy and Job passages referenced above.

[🔗 September 13th, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43898>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-43898)



I’m thankful for your website; have been following silently for a long time.

AARON  
ADAMS

One issue I have with Heiser’s work on this topic is that he too easily dismisses polemical or subversive uses of the Divine Council in Scripture. He agrees that the Scriptures flatten the first & second levels of the council (so YHWH occupies both positions), but doesn’t, as far as I’ve seen, entertain other possible polemical uses of the motif. He tends to see only one solution in any given text.

There is an alternative that preserves most of the insights Heiser proposes for Psalm 82 – that Psalm 82 uses the Divine Council as a polemical motif for the judgment not of Israel’s judges, but divine kings who oppress Israel. The merely human claims of Israel’s kings set them apart from the nations. YHWH is the true King over all the nations, and he does judge the kings of the earth.

The judgment of the kings of the nations is a major theme in the prophetic literature. Isaiah 10 is one obvious example, but Isaiah 14 is even better, because here we have an earthly king (“the king of

Babylon” in Isaiah 14:4) who claims divinity (vv12-20) but is to die like men (vv10-11). All the kings who claim divinity end up in the same situation, in Sheol.

Heiser argues that Ezekiel 28 “shifts” from the earthly prince of Tyre “to a divine figure in Eden,” (Unseen Realm, p84), but of course Heiser doesn’t think Ezekiel 28 is really about Eden. It’s still a judgment on the prince of Tyre, as Heiser says on p82:

“Let’s summarize where this leaves us. Ezekiel 28 browbeats the prince of Tyre using an ancient tale of divine arrogance in Eden, where a member of Yahweh’s council thought himself on par with the Most High. This divine throne guardian was expelled from Eden to the “ground” or underworld.”

The judgment of the serpent is the motif picked up for the judgment of an earthly king.

So, returning to Psalm 82, the Divine Assembly (to which the king of Babylon had aspirations per Isaiah 14:13) is the clear motif. But what is the purpose of the Psalm and its application? Per the prophets, a canonical approach may appropriate the Divine Council motif without adopting Heiser’s synthesis.

In response to your take on John 10, Tremper Longman’s commentary on the Psalm gives Carson’s interpretation of John 10 its due: Jesus may not be exegeting Psalm 82 so much as demonstrating the hypocrisy of judging him for the same thing they do in Psalm 82. It’s not “We’re all gods here,” but rather, “How can you stone me for this, when you have also done the same?” Carson is drawing from the common rabbinical exegesis of Psalm 82 as referring to the judges of Israel. This is commensurate with Jesus’s method elsewhere. I’m not totally convinced on this point, but it bears mentioning that it’s a viable alternative put forth by reputable scholars that others dismiss by caricature.



One other point, on the Ps 82:6 statement “I said, ‘You are gods.’” If the lament for the king of Tyre is taken as it stands in Ezek 28, God clearly calls the king of Tyre a guardian cherub. But it’s a lament for a human being using the Edenic rebellion as a lens through which to see a man \*who has called himself a god\* but is declared to be “no god” (Ezek 28:9). So God calls a man a cherub, and we all know he’s still just a man.

[October 31st, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44366>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44366)



Aaron, thanks for your readership. I’ll agree that Michael doesn’t explore the connection between the divine council and human kings enough. But that agreement is predicated on the presupposition that the divine council really is a council of supernatural beings, and that it is reflected in the physical world by human kings. This principle of “on earth, as in heaven” is vastly underestimated in biblical theology.

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In my view, your alternative doesn’t preserve very much at all. I can’t make sense of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 if they are not speaking of human kings as proxies for actual supernatural beings (or, put another way, of actual supernatural beings as symbolic of human kings). I also can’t make sense of Psalm 89, the princes of Greece and Persia in Daniel, etc, if they are not referring to actual supernatural beings. The watchers who decree things in Daniel aren’t a council of human kings who claim divinity. None of this makes sense on your view. If you check out my [kingdom series </what-is-the-kingdom-of-god-1>](https://bnonn.com/what-is-the-kingdom-of-god-1) you’ll see these kinds of connections run extraordinarily deep, so you’re not just de-supernaturalizing Psalm 82 (the motivation for which I don’t understand anyway), but you’re also cutting a large number of important biblical-theological threads and then leaving them hanging.

Btw, your suggested reading of Psalm 82 rubs the opposite direction to your suggested reading of John 10.

[🔗 October 31st, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44367>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44367)



AARON  
ADAMS

Hi Bnonn,

Thanks for the reply. I tried not to say too much, and ended up saying too little. I'm not really at odds with much you said. I did not "de-supernaturalize" Psalm 82. What I said was that there is canonical evidence that the Divine Council is being used as a polemical motif against enemy kings. If the Divine Council motif is widespread in the Mesopotamian literature, then it works as a polemic or satire in Psalm 82 independent of its correspondence to actual supernatural beings. The co-opting of Babylonian mythology to skewer the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14 works whether the Day Star corresponds to an actual supernatural being or not.

Compare Genesis 11:4-5 with Isaiah 14:13-14. The human aspiration to build a ziggurat or scale a mountain and sit in the heavens as gods can be dismissed by YHWH as ridiculous – he has to stoop down to see their magnificent tower, and the king of Babylon will end up in Sheol rather than on the mount in the assembly. But neither the builders of the tower nor a king with claims to divinity could ever have accomplished what they set out to do. So the existence of the Divine Assembly on a mountain is irrelevant to the text.

This isn't to say I'm dismissing the Divine Council as nonexistent. I agree with you that the Divine Council is a deeply-embedded Old Testament idea. But just as Genesis 1-2 probably shows a polemical relationship to the Memphite Theology, we should look (for example) at Heiser's comparison of the 3-tiered council of El to the Bible's council where YHWH occupies both the first and second tier, and conclude that the motif is being \*subverted\* at the same time it's being appropriated. If there's one takeaway from The Unseen

Realm for me, it's that Heiser's synthesis only works if his reading of Psalm 82 and Deut 32 are accurate in their details, not just the generalities. That, I think, is where the system breaks down. Building an entire supernatural worldview on these two texts is backwards hermeneutics.

There's a worthwhile article in JBL 131 no. 2 (2012) by James Trotter where he surveys lit on Ps 82, giving many more options that aren't engaged in most of the evangelical conversation, including

- 1) The true Elohim (YHWH but in an Elohistic portion of the Psalter, so the Divine Name is hidden) sits in judgment of all the gods of Canaan and their rulers. The Council of El (עדת־אל) is not the Council of YHWH, but the that of the Canaanite god El.
- 2) YHWH stands as the accuser of the gods in the Council where El presides (נצב is surveyed and Trotter convincingly argues that the vocabulary militates against YHWH serving as the judge in the psalm)
- 3) [the "human judges" position is rejected]
- 4) Redaction has brought a judgment against gods (vv 1, 6-7) together with judgment against human judges (vv 2-4) per Morgenstern
- 5) "Canaanite officials" are judged, and this directly condemns their gods (per Herbert Niehr)
- 6) Assuming a late composition date, either: a) the Pharisees condemn the Hasmoneans as (essentially) pagans (Bernhard Duhm) or b) post-exilic Israelites condemn the Hellenistic kings (Moses Bottenwieser)
- 7) Trotter's position – that the best canonical and ANE background parallels point to failures of kings to live up to their obligations. Trotter cites both biblical precedent and Mesopotamian materials in this regard.

As I mentioned in my original comment, the condemnations of the King of Tyre and King of Babylon are the closest biblical parallels to Ps 82, but Trotter also points to Gen 3:5, 22; 2 Sam 15:2-6; Ps 45:6b-7a;

Ps 72; Isa 9:2-7, 11:1-5; and Mic 3:9-12 in support of the identification of kings with divinity within Israel as well as the obligation of kings to manifest a particular ideology & ethic with the help of YHWH.

From the Ugaritic materials, Trotter finds the Legend of Kirta to hold the nearest parallels to Psalm 82. Trotter cites the Legend in translation, and I don't know Ugaritic, so the best I can do is the same. Kirta, a legendary Hurrian king, is on his deathbed, and his son says (now I'm citing from the Logos version of Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, not quoting Trotter):

3-5 How can you, father, die like a mortal?  
Your grave—will it pass into dirges?—  
To a woman's song, Father of Heights (?)?

6-9 Baal's mountain will weep for you, father—  
Mount Saphon, the holy domain,  
Mount Nani, the mighty domain,  
A domain stretched as wide as a wingspan.

9-11 But Kirta's a scion of El—  
Son of the Gentle and Holy One!"

Smith, M. S., & Parker, S. B. (1997). Ugaritic narrative poetry (Vol. 9, pp. 30-31). Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

And later, Kirta is being accused by his son, Yassib (shades of Absalom, by the way):

39-40 Yassib the Young departs,  
He enters his father's presence.

40-41 He raises his voice and proclaims:

41-42 "Hear now, O Noble Kirta!

42 Hearken, alert your ear!

43-44 In time of attack you take flight,  
And lie low in the mountains.

44-45 You've let your hand fall to vice.

45-47 You don't pursue the widow's case,  
You don't take up the wretched's claim.

47-48 You don't expel the poor's oppressor.

48-50 You don't feed the orphan who faces you,  
Nor the widow who stands at your back.

50-52 Your sickbed is your consort,  
Your infirmity, your company.

52-54 Step down—and I'll be the king!  
From your rule—I'll sit on the throne!"

Smith, M. S., & Parker, S. B. (1997). Ugaritic narrative poetry (Vol. 9, pp. 41-42). Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.

The article by Trotter is:

TROTTER, JAMES M. "Death of the אלהים in Psalm 82." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): 221-39. doi:10.2307/23488222.

I think I got full text from JBL for free, but I don't remember. Ugaritic Narrative Poetry is not free, but I couldn't find translations of "Kirta" anywhere except there.

One last note, on Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in John 10. Longman and Carson are \*not\* saying that Jesus is endorsing the Pharisees' use of Psalm 82 as a condemnation of human judges, but using their exegesis against them. That doesn't militate against anything I've

said here, because (like the use of the Divine Council motif as polemic) it's agnostic with respect to Jesus's own authoritative understanding of Psalm 82's meaning. Perhaps we have to wait until He returns to know whether Psalm 82 condemns supernatural beings, the gods of Canaan, kings with divine aspirations, or Israelite judges.

My \*opinion\* is that Ps 82 condemns the kings oppressing Israel, that אלהים takes different meanings according to context (this is obvious per Ps 82.1), that עֲדַת־אֱלֹהִים probably deliberately ambiguous – it is both “the Council of El” and “the midst of the gods,” where YHWH first assumes his “place” among them but then rises up to judge them, that בני עליון is likewise deliberately ambiguous and therefore ironic – he affirms they are “sons of Elyon” the god of Canaan, and also His own sons in truth as men, that the princes of Daniel are identified in the New Testament as archangels, and that Jesus doesn't tell us how to understand Psalm 82 in John 10.

So, like Heiser, I'm going out on a limb with Psalm 82. Trotter probably gets some things right, and so does Heiser. To my knowledge, they haven't interacted on the topic. But neither of them explores the depth of polemic in the adoption of background motifs in the OT. James Hoffmeier did this with the Memphite Theology in Gen 1-2, and he convinced me. It was in conversation with him about Israel's early incubation in the religious milieu of Egypt that I started to wonder if many aspects of the Israelite priesthood were subversions of tropes they learned in Egypt – YHWH's accommodation, transformation, and subversion of culture all at once. For example, though priests were not to shave portions of their heads (Lev 21:5), at their ordination the Levites were set apart by the shaving of the entire body (Num 8:7), a one-time practice which matches the continual practice of Egyptian priests. The consecration of the Levites then uses images familiar to the lately-Egyptian Israelites, but the image is transformed & its theological content is changed.

Entering Canaan, the same thing happens – Canaanite religion is the backdrop for the polemics of Israelite religion in Israel. Baal and El are the foils. Dagon is unseated and killed. But Baal, El, Dagon, and the rest are not who the Canaanites think they are, their temples are not what they think they are, and the Council of El is not what they think it is. We all agree on this.

[November 7th, 2019 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44429>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-44429)



GREG

I return to this post almost a year later to make an additional comment: as I was reading the City of God by Augustine, in Book 9 Chapter 23, he interprets Psalm 82 as referring to men. He doesn't rule out that angels may be considered 'gods' in other contexts, but for this passage in particular he said the psalmist was referring to humans.

The exact quote: "The Scriptures also use the name 'gods' to describe men who belong to the people of God. 'I have said, "You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Highest." Thus it is possible to take 'God of gods' (an allusion Psalm 136:2) as referring to 'gods' in this sense, and to interpret 'a great king above all gods' (Psalm 96:4) in the same way. But it may be asked: "If men are called 'gods', because they belong to the people of God – that people with whom God talk by the agency of either angels or men – are not the immortal beings much more worthy of that name? For they now enjoy that blessedness which men long to reach in their worship of God. The only reply is that it is not for nothing that in the holy Scriptures men are given the title of 'gods' more expressly than are those immortal and blessed things, to whom, as we are promised, we shall become equal in the resurrection."

I would encourage reading the full chapter (and all of Book 9 for that matter) for full context. It's been my favorite book of the massive tome so far.

Now of course, you can dismiss this and say that you think Augustine was wrong, which is fine, but I personally find interpretations by early church fathers and theologians to be beneficial when trying to understand a passage. Just some food for thought.

[🔗 April 26th, 2020 <https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-45283>](https://bnonn.com/is-psalm-82-depicting-actual-gods/#comment-45283)



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