

The Meaning of '*Elohim*

The origin of the word '*elohim* and its original meaning are not certain. The best understanding seems to be the "strong one" or the "mighty one." The idea that it communicates is that of an all-powerful and sovereign God who is king over the whole of creation.

Grammatical Description

'*Elohim* is a plural noun; however, in the Hebrew plural nouns do not always indicate plurality. If a noun is intended to be understood as a plural, then the verbs and adjectives that surround it will also be plural. Yet when '*elohim* is used of the one true God, it takes singular verbs and adjectives with it. Thus Scripture makes it clear that it views God as singular.

The plurality of the noun does not refer to the trinity since grammatical evidence does not allow for this. There are many times that the First Testament refers to the pagan gods as '*elohim* (Jud. 11:24; 1 Kgs. 11:33), yet one would never see these as references to those gods as trinitarian.

The uses of '*elohim* as a singular noun is called an honorific plural. It is not used as a plural in a numeric sense but rather as in a degree of respect. An example of this is Jud. 19:26 and 27; "At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying;" "when her master got up in the morning." The Hebrew word for "master" in these two cases is the masculine plural *adone*, which is surrounded by singular modifiers. Other examples are the word "enemy" in Jud. 16:23 and "owner" in Isa. 1:3.

The trinity is not introduced until the Second Testament and even then it is not clearly revealed. One has to connect the dots to come to the understanding of the trinity. It is important when studying the First Testament that a Second Testament understanding of theology is not read back into the First Testament Scriptures.

Uses of the Plural

Sometimes '*elohim* is used as a true numerical plural, translated as "gods," and this plurality is determined by the plural modifiers that surround the word (Ex. 12:12). Other times that the true numerical plural of '*elohim* shows up is with reference to the angelic host.

In Gen. 3:5, "The serpent said to the woman, 'surely you will not die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you will be like divine beings ('*elohim*) who know good and evil.'" Here the plural modifier "who know" determines that '*elohim* is a numeric plural – thus it is several gods here.

Psalms 82 states that God is standing in the presence of god (El, the head Canaanite god) and denounces a group of '*elohim*. "God stands in the assembly of El; in the midst of the '*elohim* He renders judgment." Some say that this refers to human judges, yet verse 7 says that they will die like mortals. The context points to the fact that they are angels that have been given jurisdiction over the nations and have rebelled against God's authority.

Deut. 32:8 tells how God divided humanity kind according to the number of the angels. "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided up humanity, He set the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the heavenly assembly."

This can be seen in Dan. 10:12-11:1 where the angel that comes to Daniel is delayed because he was battling the prince of Persia. This would be an angel that was given authority over the nation, who has rebelled against God and is now a demonic angel. Psalm 82 is reflecting this.

It is clear from these passages that the angels are considered as little '*elohim* who dwell in the courts of God and have a certain authority under His Godhood. Thus it is these angels to which God is referring in Gen. 1:26 when He says, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness." This is followed by Gen. 3:22; "And Yahweh God said, 'Now that the humanity has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'" The "us" refers to the angels that surround God.

Gen. 3:5 defines who is the "us" in Gen. 1:26 and 3:22 when they are called the "divine beings" (*elohim*).

Job 38:7 makes it clear that the angels were present during the creation of the world. And if they have certain authority over the nations (Deut. 32:8; Dan. 10:12-11:1), then it would be natural to see them in Genesis 1-2 since humanity was created as the image of God to have authority over the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28).

This is also clearly seen in Isa. 6:8, "I heard the voice of the sovereign Master say, 'Whom will I send? Who will go on our behalf?'" It is clear from the context that the "our" here refers to the seraphs mentioned in verse 2.

'Elohim as the One True God

In most cases, '*elohim* is used in reference to Israel's God and does not function as a true numerical plural; rather it is defined by the singular modifiers as an honorific plural.

"In the beginning '*elohim* created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

"So '*elohim* said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?'" (Gen. 3:13).

God is portrayed in Scripture as the true '*elohim* whom all the other little '*elohim* (angels) serve and answer to. True, some have rebelled against Him, but they still must answer to Him in judgment (Ps. 82).

Deut. 6:4 says, "Listen, Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!" The Hebrew does not point to the singularity of God but to His uniqueness among all the other gods.

An example of the same Hebrew construct in Deut. 6:4 is in Song 6:8-9. Here the groom declares that there may be sixty queens, but for him, he says of his lover, "she is one." The context makes it clear that he does not think she is the only woman but that she is unique and the only one to whom he will be loyal.

Deut. 6:4 declares that Israel's God is unique from all the others and that He is the only one humanity is to worship and be loyal to. This is supported by Deut. 7:9 and 10:17.

The use of '*elohim* for God is a title that is limited to Genesis 1-16. (In Genesis 17, God introduces a new name to Israel, *El Shaddai*.) As '*elohim*, God reveals Himself as the "Strong One" who created the world and thus rules over all creation, everything being subject to Him. The creation must submit to Him as King and Judge.