

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 224—Defining Elohim

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Introduction

In this week’s episode, we will explore the noun *elohim* and its relevance for the one true God, the God of Israel. There is a lot of misinformation and nonsense regularly spread around the internet and on YouTube regarding *elohim*, so I wanted to make an episode contributing to clarity of thought and to help people make sense of the facts. Here are some questions I want to explore in this episode:

- Why is *elohim* a plural form and what is its singular form?
- How does the Hebrew Bible use the plural form *elohim* to refer to the God of Israel in ways that indicate that God is a single self, one person?
- What is the plural of majesty, and how does it pertain to *elohim* in its plural form?
- Can human beings be called *elohim* in Scripture and what does this mean for the meaning of the plural form?

Let’s find out in this week’s episode of the BUP!

1. Basic Facts about Elohim in the Hebrew Bible

- More than 2,600 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, making it the second most common noun.
- Typically has a sense of referring to God as one who is mighty and powerful.

- Plural form of the Hebrew word *eloah* (roughly 60x, mostly in Job). Sometimes it is suggested on the internet that *elohim* is the plural of the noun *el*, but this is not true. The plural of *el* is *elim*, not *elohim*. *Elohim* is the plural of *eloah*.
 - When the plural form is used with singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns, then *elohim* refers to a single individual—usually the one true God of Israel.
 - Jews understood this concept, and the translators of the LXX, who recognized the God of Israel in these passages, translated the plural form *elohim* into the Greek singular *o theos*, the God.
 - When the plural form is used with plural verbs, adjectives, etc, then it refers to a plurality of gods, usually pagan deities.

2. Elohim and Singular Verbs

- In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1)
 - i. (בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים)
 - ii. ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός.
- I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Exod. 20:2)
 - i. אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר
 - ii. ἐγὼ εἰμι κύριος ὁ θεός σου
 - iii. Yet in the very next verse:
 - You shall have no other gods before Me. (Exod. 20:3)
 - אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרַיִם עַל-פָּנַי
 - θεοὶ
- Elohim can be used to refer to individual deities:
 - i. because they have forsaken Me, and have worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess (*elohim*) of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god (*elohim*) of Moab, and Milcom the god (*elohim*) of the sons of Ammon” (1 Kings 11:33).

3. Elohim and the Plural of Majesty

- Older scholarship used to argue that the plural form *elohim* reflected the fact that Israel in its earliest days was polytheistic, but this suggestion has been abandoned in modern times.
- Defining Plural of Majesty:
 - i. *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, “Pluralis Majestatis: Biblical Hebrew.”

- “The term ‘majestic plural’ or *pluralis majestatis* refers to the use of a plural word to refer honorifically to a single person or entity. It is also called the plural of respect, the honorific plural, the plural of excellence, or the ‘plural of intensity.’”
- Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 122, “Most honorific plurals in the Bible involve the God of Israel, and the most common of these is *elohim*.”
- Eloah has a plural form; that form is *elohim*. When *elohim* is governed by singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns, *elohim* is a numerical singular—a plural of majesty. If *elohim* is a numerical plural, then it must be translated as “gods” like any other plural Hebrew noun.

4. The God of Israel Authorizes Human Agents as His Representatives

- The plural form *elohim* is often used by God to designate his agents. Still, the plural form refers to individual agents (plural form used for one person, an extension of the plural of majesty when God shares his name with the agents who are authorized to represent Him).
 - i. *Moreover, Aaron shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you, and you will be as God to him. (Exod. 4:16)*
 - ii. *Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1)*
 - iii. *Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. (Psa 45:6)*
- God invests his name and titles into authorized human agents, and sometimes, these individual human beings are called *elohim*, which is a plural noun with a clear singular meaning. Moses was one person, called *elohim*. The Davidic king is called *elohim*, although the king is only one person.

Thanks for listening to this week’s episode!

Join us next week as we explore the noun *Adonai* pertaining to the true God of the Hebrew Bible.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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