

Psalm 82: A Latter-day Saint Reading

Stephen O. Smoot

*Stephen O. Smoot was a senior in ancient
Near Eastern studies when this paper was presented.*

The reader who has followed recent Latter-day Saint scholarship on Psalm 82 may wonder why another paper on the topic is necessary. Daniel C. Peterson and David Bokovoy have, after all, already provided extremely helpful analyses of this psalm from a Latter-day Saint perspective.¹ Notwithstanding, there may be some who still wonder who or what exactly are the gods (*'ēlōhîm*) spoken of in Psalm 82. For example, are these *'ēlōhîm* actual gods, or are they human judges, as has been suggested by traditional Jewish and Christian exegetes?

Besides offering a critical interpretation that focuses specifically on the question of whether the *'ēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 are human magistrates or deities, this paper will also look at how Latter-day Saints have understood Psalm 82 and have used it in their religious discourse. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I will not focus on Jesus' use of Psalm 82 as recorded in John 10:34–35. For those

readers who might be curious about this topic, I would recommend they pursue the work done by Peterson and Bokovoy.

Psalm 82: A Translation

For the convenience of the reader, I will first provide a translation of Psalm 82:²

1. A psalm of Asaph. God stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods [*'ēlōhîm*] he judges.
2. How long shall you judge unjustly and be partial to the wicked? Selah.
3. Be just to the poor and fatherless. Do justice to the poor and the lowly.
4. Save the poor and the downtrodden from out of the hand of the wicked.
5. They do not know, they do not understand. They walk in darkness as the foundations of the earth shake.
6. I say: you are all gods [*'ēlōhîm*]! Sons of the Most High, all of you!
7. Yet you all shall die like any mortal, and fall like any prince.
8. Arise, O God, and judge the earth, for you indeed possess all the nations.

The *'ēlōhîm* in Psalm 82 as Human Magistrates

Given that Psalm 82 uses *'ēlōhîm* at least twice to address members of “the divine council” (v. 1), we now ask the all-crucial question of who these *'ēlōhîm* are. As explained in one biblical commentary, “While one group of scholars is of the opinion that the word [*'ēlōhîm*] refers to people, in particular to human judges, another group contends that the reference here is to gods.”³ Herein lies a hermeneutical crux, for these two readings are diametrically opposed to each other, and each carries with it significant theological implications.

“Jewish tradition,” notes another biblical commentary, “interpreted this psalm as the condemnation of the human rulers of Israel.”⁴ Indeed, it has been commonly argued, including by one prominent Latter-day Saint scriptural commentator, that this traditional Jewish interpretation is correct.⁵ This reduction of the *’ēlōhīm* spoken of in this psalm to human judges or magistrates seems to stem from a desire to harmonize seemingly monotheistic teachings throughout the Bible. Thus the glaring quotation marks around “gods” in verses 1 and 6 in the conservative New International Version, for example, or Woodrow Michael Kroll’s opinion that Psalm 82 depicts God as “he views the judgments of the world’s judges” and that the *’ēlōhīm* of the psalm are therefore merely “judges of the land.”⁶ Another popular biblical commentary straightforwardly posits that this psalm “is an impeachment of unjust judges, who are officially called ‘gods.’” These “gods,” the commentary argues, are actually “the judges of Israel, so called as the official representatives of God on earth.”⁷

Standing somewhat uncomfortably between the opposing views that the *’ēlōhīm* of Psalm 82 are either human magistrates or divine beings is John Goldingay, who, in a volume published by an evangelical press, admits that the *’ēlōhīm* are in fact divine beings, but hastily adds that (despite verse 6) these deities “cannot be offspring of the Most High” on account of their negligence.⁸ Likewise, Konrad Schaefer proposes that the condemned *’ēlōhīm* in this psalm are “foreign gods [and] the corrupt judges and ministers who represent them.”⁹ Finally, the argument that the *’ēlōhīm* of this psalm are human judges finds voice in another authoritative biblical commentary, which describes Psalm 82 as a “prophetic speech . . . [that] summons wicked judges before the divine tribunal. . . . Judges are called ‘gods’ . . . in that they stand in the place of God.”¹⁰

A proof text typically marshaled in defense of this reading is Exodus 21:6 (cf. 22:8–9), which stipulates that a master shall bring

his slave “unto the judges [*ḥa-’ēlōhîm*]” (KJV) should the slave refuse to leave the master’s service after his term of labor. If Israelite judges here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible can be called *’ēlōhîm*, the reasoning goes, then surely such is the case in Psalm 82.

As we see from this sampling of biblical commentators (most of whom come from a conservative Christian theological background or draw upon conservative Christian scholarship), the commonality between these opinions is the insistence that, whatever else they might be, the *’ēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 are not actual deities but merely humans. These humans, either Israelite judges or the magistrates of other nations, prove woefully inadequate in carrying out their judicial responsibilities, and, as such, are condemned to die, notwithstanding their greatness in being called *’ēlōhîm*.

The *’ēlōhîm* in Psalm 82 as Divine Beings

As early as 1944,¹¹ a number of biblical scholars argued against the theories of more traditional exegetes that these *’ēlōhîm* are human judges. Richard J. Clifford, writing for the most recent edition of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes, “The setting [of Psalm 82] is the assembly of heavenly beings, who were thought to rule the nations of the earth under God’s supervision. . . . In [Psalm 82], the gods are summoned to trial, found guilty of misrule, and punished with mortality.”¹² Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, writing in the popular *Jewish Study Bible*, agree, explaining that Psalm 82 is “a vision of a heavenly court scene” composed of “members of God’s heavenly court.”¹³ Finally, Patrick D. Miller, in his commentary provided in the *HarperCollins Study Bible*, informs his readers, “The psalm is a literary report of the action of the divine council or heavenly assembly” wherein “the God of Israel rises in the council of the gods.”¹⁴

In overviewing the more technical literature on the subject of the divine council, we see a similar idea articulated. Miller has

elsewhere argued that Psalm 82 “takes place entirely in the world of the gods . . . in which God rises and pronounces judgment on the gods.”¹⁵ James Luther Mays explains that Psalm 82 gives “a particular Israelite expression” to the ancient theological notion that “pantheons of gods . . . were thought to meet in a divine assembly under the presiding authority of the first or father deity.”¹⁶ Psalm 82, according to E. Theodore Mullen Jr. in an important monograph, therefore “presents a picture of judgment in the divine realm” of the gods.¹⁷ As Mullen clarifies elsewhere, this psalm finds close resonance with other Semitic and Mesopotamian conceptions of the divine council, including the notion of a head god dispensing justice among lesser deities. With this understanding Mullen concludes that the *’ēlōhīm* of the psalm “are gods . . . and not human rulers or judges.”¹⁸ Finally, S. B. Parker argues that this psalm “recounts a unique procedure and judgment in the council,” where “one deity (Yahweh) addresses all the other gods.”¹⁹

As this sampling of citations shows, these scholars writing in the past few decades have recognized the insufficiency of the explanation that the *’ēlōhīm* of Psalm 82 are human judges and have argued against it, suggesting instead that Psalm 82 is best understood as a genuine divine council scene comparable to such scenes depicted in the religious literature of other Semitic and Mesopotamian cultures.²⁰ In this reading, God takes his stand in a divine realm of other gods and, acting as the supreme judge of the divine council, pronounces doom upon his attending deities should they persist in their wrongdoing.

Arguments for the Presence of the Divine Council in Psalm 82

When Psalm 82 is scrutinized, it becomes increasingly clear that the *’ēlōhīm* of this psalm are in fact divine beings, regardless of how neglectful they might be in executing their divine duties. Evidence

for this is seen in at least two ways: (1) historical evidence for the development of Israelite/Canaanite conception of deity, and (2) contextual evidence offered throughout the Hebrew Bible affording a (nearly) consistent view of the divine council.

When the Israelite conception of deity is compared to earlier Semitic (particularly Canaanite) conceptions of the same, as has been done at length by Mark S. Smith, it seems reasonable that such served as a very likely historical-religious *mise-en-scène*, as it were, for the Hebrew Bible's depiction of the divine council.²¹ This should come as no surprise, since, as Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager explain, "The religion of ancient Israel appropriated several aspects of the Canaanite cult, including the identification of Yahweh as El, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon."²² Some of these appropriations include, but are not limited to, the depiction of a head deity passing judgment and decrees on lesser deities, who are subservient to the head deity, and the assertion of the head deity's incomparability and ascendancy in the divine council.²³

With this in mind, we can now compare the depiction of the divine council in Psalm 82 with other depictions of such throughout the Hebrew Bible.²⁴ Gerald Cooke, in his important commentary on the divine council in 1964, argues that the theory that the *'ēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 are human judges is "fatally weak," for such a supposition must ignore the unmistakable parallel imagery of Yahweh's divine council in other psalms (e.g., Psalm 29:1-2; 89:6-8), and elsewhere in the biblical corpus (e.g., Genesis 1:26-27; 6:2; 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6; 40:1-2; 1 Kings 22:19-23; 40:1-2; Job 1-2).²⁵ Cooke further notes, "The statement that those who are gods shall nevertheless die like men appears to us to be an undeniable indication of the divine status of those who are so addressed; their (former) immortality is clearly presupposed."²⁶

Cooke's views converge with Michael Heiser, who convincingly argues that it makes no sense to threaten mortals with something

already as inevitable as death. “If the [*’ēlōhîm*] in Psalm 82 are humans, why are they sentenced to die ‘like humans’? This sounds as awkward as sentencing a child to grow up, or a dog to bark.”²⁷ Heiser articulates further objections that are worthy of reproduction here:

What is the scriptural basis for the idea that this psalm has God presiding over a council of *humans* that governs the nations of the earth? At no time in the Hebrew Bible did Israel’s elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations of the earth. . . . [W]hy would the corrupt decisions of a group of humans shake the foundations of the earth (v. 5)? . . . One cannot argue that the references to the gods/sons of God outside Psalm 82 speak of humans. Job 38:7–8 has the sons of God present at the creation of the world, rendering a human interpretation impossible. The same can be said for Psalm 89:5–7 (Hebrew, vv. 6–8), where the sons of God of Yahweh’s council are *in heaven in the throne room of God*, not on earth.²⁸

In addition to these points, the common argument noted before, that human magistrates are called *’ēlōhîm* in such places as Exodus 21, and should therefore be designated such in Psalm 82, proves unpersuasive upon close inspection. There is nothing in particular that compels one to read *hā’ēlōhîm* as “the judges” in this and other instances. One could very easily understand *hā’ēlōhîm* as simply “God,” as is clearly the case elsewhere in the book of Exodus (cf. Exodus 3:6, 11, 13). What’s more, when viewed within a broader backdrop of ancient Near Eastern jurisprudence, as has been done by Cyrus Gordon, the argument for translating *hā’ēlōhîm* in Exodus 21 as “God,” or even “the gods,” becomes stronger.²⁹ In fact, Anne E. Draffkorn goes so far as to argue that the *’ēlōhîm* of Exodus 21 are possibly household gods comparable to the *teraphim* of Genesis 31 and in no way human magistrates.³⁰ Given these reasons, this argument has little exegetical credibility and is therefore not convincing.

We may therefore conclude that the historical and scriptural evidence strongly favors the theory of modern scholars that the *'ēlohîm* of Psalm 82 are actual deities, not humans. Upon close inspection, the traditional Jewish and Christian understanding of the nature of the *'ēlohîm* of Psalm 82 does not withstand scrutiny.

Latter-day Saint Doctrinal Application of Psalm 82

Latter-day Saint commentators have long been fascinated with Psalm 82 (and, by association, John 10:34–35) and the depiction of the divine council. This has been primarily because of the unique Latter-day Saint teaching of deification and the Mormon acknowledgment of a plurality of gods.³¹ Joseph Smith devoted special attention to the doctrines of deification and the divine council and elucidated a compelling theology on this topic (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:58; 132:20; Abraham 3–4).³² As early as 1832, a revelation received by Joseph Smith spoke of exalted Saints using the wording of Psalm 82. “Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (D&C 76:58–59).

Accordingly, Latter-day Saints have appealed to Psalm 82 as a proof text in defense of the doctrine of deification. Orson Pratt, one of Mormonism’s early influential doctrinal expounders, appealed to Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 82 in John 10:34–35 as proof that the Bible taught the doctrine of deification:

In this world as the children of God, we are destined, if we keep his commandments, to grow in intelligence until we finally become like God our Father. By living according to every word which proceeds from the mouth of God, we shall attain to his likeness, the same as our children grow up and become like their parents. As children through diligence attain to the wisdom and knowledge of their parents, so may we attain

to the knowledge of our Heavenly Parents, and if we are obedient to this commandment we will not only be called the sons of God, but be gods.³³

Latter-day Saint commentators in recent times have employed Psalm 82 in a similar manner. Sterling W. Sill taught in 1965 that Psalm 82:6 “pointed out the destiny of [God’s] faithful children,”³⁴ and President Boyd K. Packer, citing the same scripture, affirmed, “We *are* the children of God. That doctrine is not hidden away in an obscure verse. It is taught over and over again in scripture.”³⁵ Less than one year later, President Gordon B. Hinckley appealed to Psalm 82:6 in his admonition to not “waste your time feeling sorry for yourself. Don’t belittle yourself. Never forget that you are a child of God. You have a divine birthright.”³⁶

John M. Madsen, speaking in the priesthood session of the April 2008 general conference of the Church, used Psalm 82:6, among other scriptures, as evidence that we are all “sons [and daughters] of God [who] can fulfill our mission and destiny.”³⁷ Finally, Tad R. Callister, in a recent Mormon exploration into the doctrine of deification, argued that in John 10:34–35, “The Savior was merely reaffirming a basic gospel teaching that all men [and women] are children of God, and thus all might become like Him.”³⁸

These Latter-day Saint expounders of scripture, in appealing to Psalm 82 to bolster the Latter-day Saint teaching of deification, in some ways go beyond what the psalm says. There is no discussion in Psalm 82 of keeping commandments to attain divinity or of heavenly parents, for example. However, it should be remembered that these commentators are not attempting to offer a critical exegesis to determine how the divine council was conceived in ancient Israel, but rather they are concerned with giving this psalm meaning and significance to modern Church members. This is not to say that the Latter-day Saint teaching of deification, or the Mormon appeal to Psalm 82 in support of such, is entirely unjustified or unscriptural.

As has been explored at length by both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint scholars, the Mormon concept of deification does find arguable support in the Bible.³⁹ It is to acknowledge, rather, that modern Church members have reapplied or “likened” this ancient scripture into a new theological context (cf. 1 Nephi 19:23).

Conclusion

Psalm 82 affords us an excellent look at the Israelite conception of the divine council. I find the conclusion inescapable that the *’ēlōhîm* of this psalm are in fact divine personages who can appropriately and straightforwardly be called gods. When this psalm is critically analyzed, it becomes clear that Psalm 82 depicts God standing in his divine council and righteously issuing judgment to subordinate deities should they persist in their neglect of the vulnerable of humanity. There is no compelling reason to assume that these *’ēlōhîm* are human judges or magistrates and many compelling reasons to believe they are divine beings.

From a Latter-day Saint perspective informed by modern revelation that amplifies and expands our understanding of the scriptures, Psalm 82, besides being a portrayal of the divine council as understood by the ancient Israelites, also offers a glimpse at God’s plan for his children. It details our divine nature as children of heavenly parents and provides us the assurance that, one day, we will return to our Father and Mother and dwell with them in their heavenly council as their resplendent, beautiful, and majestic sons and daughters.

Notes

1. Daniel C. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges,

- Donald W. Parry, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 471–594; David E. Bokovoy, “Ye Really *Are* Gods’: A Response to Michael Heiser Concerning the LDS Usage of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John,” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 267–313. See also Joseph F. McConkie, “Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1986), 173–98.
2. I make this translation from the standard Hebrew text of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.
 3. John W. Rogerson, ed., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 404.
 4. John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 389.
 5. The influential Latter-day Saint author and Apostle James E. Talmage fell in line with the scholarship of his day when he proposed that the *’elōhîm* of Psalm 82 are “judges empowered by divine authority.” See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1915), 489.
 6. Woodrow Michael Kroll, *Psalms: The Poetry of Palestine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 235–36.
 7. J. R. Dummelow, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 362.
 8. John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 567.
 9. Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 203.
 10. James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 472.
 11. H. Wheeler Robinson, “The Council of Yahweh,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1944): 151–57.
 12. Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 842.
 13. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1375. Berlin and Brettler make a rather questionable assertion that “[t]his psalm forcefully rejects the idea of other gods; God deprives them of their divinity and He alone has dominion over all nations.” I disagree and see the injunction of verses 6–7 as not so much a divine repudiation, but rather a warning that, should the gods persist in their

- wrongdoing, they shall be stripped of their divinity. In any case, however, the existence of other gods is assumed in this psalm, contra Berlin and Brettler.
14. Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 800.
 15. Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 9 (1987): 69.
 16. James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 269.
 17. E. Theodore Mullen Jr., "Divine Assembly," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:216.
 18. E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 24 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 228-44, quote at 236.
 19. S. B. Parker, "Council," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 395.
 20. See Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 259-73.
 21. Mark S. Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 22. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 352. Further syncretism between Canaanite and Israelite religion can be seen in such biblical passages as Psalm 68:4, where Yahweh shares the same epithet ("cloud rider") with the Canaanite storm god.
 23. Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to this point. For a representative sample of current scholarship on this subject, see Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, passim.
 24. I have done this more fully elsewhere. See Stephen O. Smoot, "The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Studia Antiqua: A Student Journal for the Study of the Ancient World* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 1-18, esp. 4-10.
 25. Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35, no. 1 (1964): 31.
 26. Cooke, "Sons of God(s)," 31.
 27. Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 1 (2008): 17.

28. Heiser, "Monotheism," 17.
29. Cyrus H. Gordon, "אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54, no. 3 (September 1935): 139-44.
30. Anne E. Draffkorn, "Ilāni/Elohim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 1957): 216-24.
31. An excellent summary of this doctrine can be found on the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See "Becoming Like God," online at <https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng> (accessed February 27, 2014).
32. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 247, 338-62, 378-84. See also Stephen O. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, & Creation in the Book of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28-39.
33. Orson Pratt, "Salvation Tangible," in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-Day Saints' Book Depot, 1877), 18:292.
34. Sterling W. Sill, "'Ye are Gods,'" *Improvement Era*, December 1965, 1127.
35. Boyd K. Packer, "The Pattern of our Parentage," *Ensign*, November 1984, 66.
36. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Strengthening Each Other," *Ensign*, February 1985, 4.
37. John M. Madsen, "A 12-Year-Old Deacon," *Ensign*, May 2008, 57.
38. Tad R. Callister, "Our Identity and Our Destiny," *Religious Educator* 14, no. 1 (2013): 5.
39. See Ernst W. Benz, "Imago Dei: Man in the Image of God," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1978), 201-22; Peterson, "Ye Are Gods," 471-594; Jordan Vajda, "'Partakers of the Divine Nature': A Comparative Analysis of Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 3 (2002).