

GODS?

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August 14, 2022

Reading: Psalm 82

Elohim presides in the great assembly and renders judgment among the gods:

“How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?” Elohim asks. *Selah*

Defend the weak and the orphan; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

The gods know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

Elohim said, “You are ‘gods’; you are all sons of the Most High. But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler.”

Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

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I returned from vacation on Tuesday evening excited to see you all again this morning. It was wonderful to be away and lovely to be home again. It was a delightful and meaningful trip, thanks for asking, and it even had moments of vacation embedded in it.

I returned expecting the usual mix of re-entry pressures: an empty refrigerator, a full email inbox and a brain that had become more accustomed to floating lakes, staring at stars, and reading a map than formulating coherent thoughts and juggling multiple schedules and needs. I wasn’t expecting to preach! Still, I am glad that I could be a good clergy partner and step in so that Cynthia could attend to a family emergency while DeWayne is taking vacation time away from the office.

This means that today’s Command to Preach selection is more or less provided by me! I will continue with congregational submissions next Sunday, but this week I got to choose the scripture and I chose this Psalm because I found it intriguing. I hadn’t encountered it before, and I was taken by what seemed like a reference to polytheism in the Hebrew Bible. Then the more I looked into it, the more I learned that this Psalm is quite complicated and can have at least two significant interpretations.

To jump in, we need to remember exactly what a Psalm is. The Psalms are a specific collection of texts found in the Hebrew Bible. They are very old and have many purposes: psalms of praise or lament, psalms of wisdom or prophecy, psalms of welcome and entrance. The exact usages of the Psalms are lost to history and they even often contain a word, *Selah*, that has no known specific translation. It is often assumed that the Psalms were sung or set to music, but this also is contested.

And the Psalms can be long or quite short like this one. Frankly, its brevity is also a reason I was drawn to it. In Psalm 82 we see God—here called Elohim—joining the assembly of gods and taking over. When this

Psalm was composed, it was likely at a time when our current conception of monotheism was still being formed, so the first interpretation has us seeing the acknowledgment of a pantheon of gods while only worshipping the ancient Israelite God Elohim. And then Elohim more or less disbands the assembly of gods and takes away their divinity. Elohim puts the pantheon on trial, finds them unjust and then takes away their immortality, which mean they, too, will eventually die. One scholar wrote that Psalm 82 “portrayed the death of all other gods.”¹

I find this fascinating! You have to acknowledge the other gods in order to kill them off. After millennia of translation and editing and commentary, you can still find occasional vestiges of our ancestor’s pre-monotheistic belief structure. (There are a few of these. See if you can find another reference towards the beginning of Genesis. That one involves giants!) I love finding these things because it helps me remember that I cannot attempt to make meaning from the stories of the Bible without some curiosity about the context at the time of development.

And why did Elohim put the assembly of gods on trial and then punish them? Because they were defending the unjust and showing partiality to the wicked! Elohim upended the divine structure in order to protect creation, specifically us humans. There was too much injustice, so God changed the system. There was too much support for wickedness, so God punished those that were allowing it to happen. Not only did God name what was wrong, but also we get a description of what is expected of our world: To defend the weak and the orphan and uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed; to rescue the weak and the needy.

This might seem somewhat obvious to us now, but think about how foundational and revolutionary this was. God, or Elohim, steps into power and immediately names what is the most essential, who is the most important, the thick line that we should not cross—to care for those in our midst who are the most in need. It is reminders like this that help me remember how radical our call is, how sacred our work, and how we still have a lot more distance to go before we can say we have helped make this happen.

So the first interpretation is that the Psalmist is writing that God is talking to the other gods in the assembly. There is another interpretation—specifically in conversations between Rabbis in the Jewish Talmud. Instead of seeing this as a meaningful myth about the ascendance of God above the other ‘gods’ and setting an expectation of how God will treat us, this other interpretation makes it about us humans. The great assembly, instead of being the pantheon of dismissed gods, is us. We are the divine assembly. We are the ones who have been dismissed from our exemplary status and made mortal. We are the ones who are being criticized. Now this takes a different turn, does it not?

This interpretation recounts back to the beginning of Genesis when we were once immortal in the garden of Eden with God and then, because of our inability to follow expectations, are made mortal and given the result of death. We are brought secondary to God, we are no longer the rulers, no longer peers. In the Psalm this happens because God sees us as being the ones defending the unjust and showing partiality to the wicked. We are still given special status as the sons (or children) of God but made mortal and secondary.

This interpretation is supported by another Rabbi in our collection of texts: Jesus. In the book of John, when Jesus is being accused by the temple authorities of claiming to be divine, he refers back to this Psalm. As they were picking up stones to hurl at him Jesus reminds them that the scriptures call all of us sons and children of God, so he isn’t being blasphemous at all. And they lowered their stones. (John 10:34–36)

¹*The New Interpreters Bible, Volume IV*, Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994) p. 1006.

This second interpretation forces us to look at ourselves, our placement in the world, and our responsibilities. In this Psalm we are simultaneously reminded of our own mortality because of our inability to listen to the commandments to take care of each other while also being called children of God and part of the divine assembly. We are both part of God and very much distinguished from God. We are in a class all our own. And we are given a task as well as the power to make it happen.

We are given the task, the calling, the commandment to defend the weak and the orphan and uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed; to rescue the weak and the needy. We are told to no longer defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked. God (Elohim) hands us a sacred responsibility to take care of each other, to recognize those who are in need and lift them up. We are given a role in the Divine drama and expected to carry it out.

And yet we are explicitly reminded that we are not divine and that we are mortal. We are human beings with all the limitations that come with that. Still, we are expected to care for those that are in most need using only our human abilities.

How do you do this? How do you carry this responsibility? In what ways do you—individually, as a church, as a society—defend the weak? Care for the orphan? Uphold the cause of the poor? And the oppressed? How do you help rescue the weak and the needy?

God doesn't tell us how we should do it, just that we should. We are told that we are made special and also human. We cannot work for this justice using Divine means—we are no longer gods after all—we must work to achieve it using our mortal human abilities: our human abilities that are full of compassion and love and creativity and courage; our human abilities that are conversely often stymied by selfishness and greed and apathy and limited imagination. How do you carry out this sacred calling? How do you do it with the rest of the assembly of the children of God?

There may be other interpretations of this Psalm that help you to make meaning out of it. I would love to hear how this short, ancient hymn lives and grows in you. It seems important, though, to remember that from the very beginning of our spiritual story, the sacred calling to care for the oppressed and vulnerable has been paramount. Whether Elohim is talking to other former-gods and punishing them for their injustice or whether God is talking to us as the assembly, it is absolutely clear for whom we are called to care. These are our spiritual roots, connected to our ethical ancestors, and we are blessed to be continually reminded of our responsibility and our calling. May it be so.