

# GOD AND THE GODS IN ASSEMBLY

## An Interpretation of Psalm 82\*

MATITIAHU TSEVAT

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati

ANCIENT Israel was committed to monotheism but constantly challenged by polytheism. How does the Old Testament, the document of the committed, respond to the challenge? The best known answer is that propagated by Deutero-Isaiah and many other authors: The gods of polytheism, the "other gods," often equated with the gods of the nations, are nonthings. This answer is known best because it is recorded most frequently, argued most vigorously, and comprehended most easily; it is water-clear monotheism.

Another, and differing, answer is less prominent: Yhwh, the God of Israel, is the supreme God, but the "other gods" are also real gods; He maintains their reality even as He has ordained their subordination. Moreover, He has assigned them functions in the scheme of the universe. Deut. 4:19 puts it as clearly as one could wish (and 29:25 refers to it): "When you look up to the heavens and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them and serving them. These Yhwh your God has allotted to the other peoples everywhere under the heaven."<sup>1</sup> In keeping with this, David, persecuted by King Saul and fearing that he would be forced to leave his people, says that wicked men may have enticed the king to drive him out of the land so that he would no longer "be part of Yhwh's property (נחלה ה', i. e., Israel), saying (to him in effect), 'Go, serve other gods!'" (I Sam. 26:19). If he takes refuge in another country with an alien people, he will have to serve the god(s) of that domain.

Y. Kaufmann shows some awareness of this concept in his treatment of the religion of the Pentateuch and the historical books (Former Prophets),<sup>2</sup> but its significance eludes him, as indeed it must,

\* References in these notes to (M.) Buttenwieser, (M.) Dahood, (F.) Delitzsch, (H.) Gunkel, and (E. J.) Kissane refer to their commentaries on Psalms (a.l.).

<sup>1</sup> After the *New Jewish Publication Society Translation; The Torah* (1962).

<sup>2</sup> חולדות האמנה הישראלית I (1938 ff.), pp. 40 (ff.), 615 f., and elsewhere; *The Religion of Israel* . . . Abridged by M. Greenberg (1960), pp. 127 f.

if he is to remain consistent with one of his central theses: the Bible does not allow to the gods of pagandom the attribute of reality. This thesis is unfortunate, as the issue under discussion shows. For one thing, it is bad philology in that it disregards unequivocal literary attestations, such as the Deuteronomy passage just quoted. For another, it obstructs our view of the scope and the thrust of biblical faith (and is bad philology on that account also). It would have been easy for Israel to recognize Yhwh as its only God once it was convinced that there were no other gods in existence. It was another thing altogether to be faithful to Him in the face of a plethora of gods from among whom they might choose their deity. The above Deuteronomy passage continues: "(... These Yhwh your God has allotted to the other peoples...) But you Yhwh took and brought out of Egypt... to be the people of His own property" (נחלה). Israel is to hold fast to Yhwh because of the special relationship between them, which relationship, formed in the past and reaching into the present, is nevertheless capable of being disregarded by Israel. Joshua puts it to them succinctly: "If you do not wish to serve Yhwh, choose now whom you do wish to serve — the gods whom your fathers in Transeuphratia served or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live" (Josh. 24:15).<sup>3</sup> Choose they must because no people can be without a god, but they have their pick from a sizable number, and the objects are neither pagan figments nor "fetishes." The Old Testament records the many centuries of Israelite history as a succession of challenges, real challenges, emanating from real sources. The record does not read like a psychiatric case history with the subject chasing after illusions.<sup>4</sup>

Analogous to the foregoing is the biblical attitude regarding various forms of magic, occult science and practice. The Bible prohibits necromancy, soothsaying, and the like. It does so not because they are ineffective but precisely because they are efficacious. Scripture shows the general view of its time that the ideas behind these practices are sound and, if these techniques are correctly and auspiciously performed, they may well achieve their purpose, but — they are not

<sup>3</sup> For the understanding of the passage, as well as the whole story and its historical background, I recommend to the reader V. Maag's contribution to *Hebraische Wortforschung; Festschrift . . . W. Baumgartner*, VT Supplem. 16 (1967), pp. 205-218.

<sup>4</sup> Nota bene: The object (indirect) of עשה שפטים "to mete out punishments" is man in Ezekiel (9 [11] times) and in late Chronicles (once); in preprophetic Exodus (12:12) and Numbers (33:4) it is the Egyptian gods, who (pace Kaufmann) are every bit as real as man and beast preceding them in the same verse of Exodus.

for Israel.<sup>5</sup> In most of the nonprophetic books of the Bible, we have actuality pitted against actuality and not actuality against non-actuality. If the modern reader is disillusioned with the polytheism<sup>6</sup> and occultism of some parts of the Bible, let him consider that it is the aspect of actuality (reality) against actuality that makes the Bible a living book; where the issue is actuality against nonactuality, interest flags because battle with a strawman is no battle at all.

Actuality and nonactuality are the pair of categories under which the Old Testament sees the "other gods," with the chronological and literary progression moving from the first to the second. For the theologian there is no middle ground between the two; a thing either exists or does not exist. But for the historian who is interested in beliefs as they were held and in their formations and transformations, in the appearance and disappearance of concepts in the flow of time, there is a middle ground; it is the phase of transition in the mind of man, the event of change of concepts from that of the actuality of the gods to their nonactuality. The study of history begins with the assembling of sources and their interpretation. In what follows I translate and interpret a document revealing this transition: psalm 82.

#### 1 A Psalm of Asaph

'Yhwh' stands in the divine assembly,  
He gives judgment in the midst of the gods.

2 "How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?" (Selah).

3 "Give judgment to the poor and the orphan,  
vindicate the wretched and the destitute;

4 "rescue the poor and the needy,  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked! —

5 "Without knowledge, without understanding  
they walk in darkness;  
the very foundations of the earth are shaken. —

6 "Once I had thought you to be gods,  
all of you sons of the Most High;

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kaufmann (*supra*, n. 2), pp. 462-465, 467 f., and elsewhere (English abridgment, pp. 78-80).

<sup>6</sup> To call the phenomenon monolatry — less accurately, henotheism — is only to reaffirm its essential polytheism.

<sup>7</sup> Or "guilty," *עוין* has both an ethical and a juridical sense.

- 7 "verify, however, you are now mortal like man,  
you will fall like any minister."  
8 Arise, O 'Yhwh', judge the earth,  
for all the nations are indeed Your property!

The psalm offers no textual or linguistic difficulties. The only question is whether the first אלהים in vs. 1 and its recurrence in vs. 8 have supplanted an original יהוה. The shrewd suspicion that אלהים is not original rests upon two considerations. (1) The psalm belongs to the elohistic group (chs. 42-83), which as an entity is characterized by a rather late change of most occurrences of יהוה to אלהים. (2) It corrects the defect of the poem in having אלהים twice but with different meanings in the same verse (vs. 1), which is both stylistically gauche and likely to confuse the listener or reader.

Vs. 1. The meaning of ערת אל "divine assembly" is so well known<sup>8</sup> today that it no longer needs broad documentation.<sup>8</sup> Similar phrases occur in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic literatures. The expression referred originally to the political organ of a primitive democracy, a phenomenon which can be discerned in the pantheons of various non-Israelite cultures. In Israel this image has given way to that of an absolute monarchy (see Ps. 95:3), and the "divine assembly" is a body of counsellors and(/or) administrators. We encounter this body in I Kings 22:19-22; Isa. 6; Job 1:6-12, 2:1-7; and elsewhere. In this psalm, its members are called אלהים "gods" (vss. 1, 6; also in 95:3) and בני עליון "sons of the Most High" (vs. 6). In Job they are בני אלהים "sons of God/of the gods"; in Ps. 29:1 (though not functioning as counsellors or administrators) בני אלים "sons of the gods," an appellation closely resembling ערת אל of the verse under discussion.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F. M. Cross, *Journ. of N.E. Stud.* 12 (1953), p. 274, n. 1, gives an instructive and still quite useful survey.

<sup>9</sup> It is likely that the component "sons of" in some of these phrases points to an earlier conception of the minor gods as sons of the supreme god, El, or of major gods. While this is full-bodied mythology, its employment as a linguistic fossil was not necessarily offensive to later generations of a different faith. Hebrew "son of A," as is well known, often has the meaning of "member of group or category A," e. g., בן-בויה "member of the class (sometimes guild) of prophets," i. e., "prophet"; בן-בקר "bovine." In this connection בן-המלך, literally and often actually "son of the king," is an expression of special pertinence. As was first observed by Ch. Clermont-Ganneau in 1888 and recently fully demonstrated for Israel and some other ancient Oriental peoples by G. Brin (לשונו 31 [1966 f.], pp. 5-20, 85-96), בן-המלך and its correspondences in other languages not infrequently mean one in the service of the king, usually in an administrative role. (Of late, A. F. Ratney has challenged Brin's interpretation [לשונו 33 (1968 f.), pp. 304-308] — successfully in my opinion, in respect to some of his examples — unsuccessfully, in respect to the phenomenon in

As will be seen, in Ps. 82 they function as largely independent executives; "vassals" would be a term loosely in keeping with the time. What brings them together to the assembly of which this verse speaks is presumably one or more of its normal functions: report (Job 1 f.), deliberation, or execution (I Kings 22).

In this assembly Yhwh "stands" — in order to judge the assembled, as the text goes on to state. From various occurrences in the Bible, and as far as their limited number permits generalization, we know that a judge in Israel was normally seated (I Kings 7:7; Isa. 16:5; 28:6; Ps. 122:5; Pr. 20:8 — a king; Exod. 18:13 f. — Moses; Judg. 4:5 — Deborah; Ruth 4:2 — a multijudge court). God, on the other hand, when He judges is commonly spoken of as standing<sup>10</sup> (עמד נצב) [also עמד], Isa. 3:13; Ps. 82:1) or standing up (קום, Ps. 76:10; 82:8).<sup>11</sup> The employment of one of the verbs, קום, is particularly instructive in that it indicates the suddenness and dynamism of the action (cf. Isa. 33:10; Ps. 12:6); God's judgment has many meanings for man, but it is first and most immediately experienced as His intervention. Accordingly, the other verbs (עמד, נצב) express the resultant stance (cf. Isa. 3:13 f.). Whereas it is the normal posture of God, in conception or vision, to be seated as He is surrounded by His servants and ministers (I Kings 22:19–22; Isa. 6; Ezek. 1:26 ff.), standing is a sign of an extraordinary event. The meaning, then, of the psalm's opening is that what might normally be a routine assembly, where the gods report or participate in deliberations, has unexpectedly turned into a tribunal; God has stood up to judge the assembled.<sup>12</sup>

general) In view of the correspondence between earthly and heavenly courts, בן-אלהים\* (the singular does not occur in the Hebrew Bible but is found in the Aramaic part, viz., בר-אלהין, Dan. 3:25) may well mean one belonging to the divine sphere. This observation can both be amplified and sharpened. While בן "son of" and איש "man of" are usually interchangeable in the sense discussed here (cf. Brin, pp. 93–95), this is not the case in regard to the divine. Here the classification is clear-cut: בר-אלהין/בן-אלהים\* is a supernatural being belonging to the sphere of God, whereas איש-אלהים is a human being belonging to this sphere, a prophet or a man considered particularly close to God. (This understanding of the compound is at variance with that of W. Herrmann; see his "Die Göttersöhne," *Zeitschr. für Rel.-und Geistesgesch.* 12 [1960], pp. 242–251. I cannot accept Herrmann's interpretation of a number of texts, particularly those from Ugarit.)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. L. Ginsberg, *Journ. of the Am. Or. Soc.* 88 (1968), p. 51, n. 24.

<sup>11</sup> The exception is an occurrence in Daniel (7:9), a book which shows many foreign influences to normal Old Testament style and ancient Israelite mores and ideas. On the other hand, the substantial reason, in this passage, for God being seated may be that the procedure has not yet begun and in the continuation it is only fragmentarily described.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. "Yhwh in heaven will call to account (יפקד) the heavenly host" (Isa. 24:21).

Vs. 2. The speaker is God — He speaks throughout most of the psalm and He opens with the accusation. A prosecutor, separate and apart from the magistrate, is not a normal feature in Israelite court procedure.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, God, the author and guarantor of the norms of justice, is the aggrieved party; He acts as plaintiff and lodges the accusation. (Where God is a party, there is no distinction between criminal and civil cases.) Literarily this fact is put to effective use: Placing the accusation in the mouth of God lends it special force and authority.

<sup>1</sup> "How long will you practice injustice?" Although the gods act individually and each one is responsible in his realm, they are addressed collectively, because it is as a group that they constitute the opposition: "the gods" against "God."

Vss. 3-4. The English translation does not adequately convey the force of these lines which the Hebrew poetic mechanisms held for the Israelite audience. The lines form two distichs which, while expressing the same content with different words, are yet of great formal similarity.<sup>14</sup> The duplication of the content, possibly a mere play with poetic devices, serves here to retard the progress of action and urge on the hearer the consideration of what these rulers of the world ought to have done but have not. With this admonition, which, for all its force, is no longer than twelve words, the accusation, first part of God's speech, concludes.

Vs. 5. The failure of the gods, however, is not only a thing of the past and it is not accidental. Not that they are unwilling to do what they are bidden — if that were the case, there would be hope that they would change their minds — but they are inherently incapable of grasping the issue, of walking in the light. As long as they are in office there is no hope for the world; the whole present order is corrupt, and the corruption affects the foundations of the earth.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Exceptions are Ps. 109:6 (denied by G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* [1963], p. 83) and, on a different plain, Zech. 3:1.

<sup>14</sup> The similarity is manifest in three areas: corresponding sounds — quantity (word lengths) and quality (alliteration, assonance, etc.); corresponding verb forms — shape, type and function; and in the structure of corresponding word groups (including identical chiasmi). This similarity in phonetics, morphology and syntax, going far beyond the normal parallelism, is a noteworthy poetic element and lends weight to the exhortation.

<sup>15</sup> The idea that the earth is founded upon justice shines through the Isaian passage: "I am laying a stone for a foundation in Zion . . . and I shall make justice the line and righteousness the plummet" (Isa. 28:16 f.). In Ps. 89:15 and 97:2 justice is even the foundation of God's throne and, similarly, in Prov. 16:12 of a king's throne. (Therefore, contrary to F. I. Anderson's opinion [*Biblica* 50<sup>7</sup> (1969), p. 393],

The speaker here may possibly be the psalmist, a reflection interrupting the account of events. But it is much more likely that it is still God Who is speaking. Realizing the futility of His exhortation, He ponders the issue. The verse, the second part of God's speech, is not an address or a proclamation but the deliberation of the judge in camera in preparation of the verdict.

Vss. 6-7. This is rendered in vss. 6 f. While some interpreters have understood this to be the psalmist's aside rather than the Deity's decree, this construction possesses little merit. A trial typically ends with the pronouncement of a judgment. Our construction has this pronouncement made, as one would naturally expect, by the judge. One might resort to the alternative of the psalmist's expressing his reflections, if there were anything in the text which would make a juridical proclamation by God a forced interpretation. As the matter stands, however, to encroach upon the prerogative of the judge and place a judgment-like utterance in the mouth of an onlooker is clearly to weaken an already weak case. To have the psalmist say, "I thought you were gods, but now I know better," is, furthermore, to credit him with a rather trivial statement; for this merely amounts to the admission of a mistaken opinion, a misinterpretation of the facts. But of far greater moment is God's recognition of a fault in the order of the world as He established it (see to vs. 8).<sup>16</sup> Now the purport of God's words, expressing this recognition, is not to deny that the accused have ever been gods — were this so, there would have been no assembly or court scene to begin with — but rather to declare that their status is not immutable. Because the gods have not fulfilled their function, they will be deposed, will cease to be gods.<sup>17</sup> This is expressed by "you are mortal like man."

Immortality is the hallmark of the divine, mortality that of the human. Gen. 3:22 reads: "Yhwh God said, 'Now that man has become like one of us (i. e., a divine being) in that he knows good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the

---

the idea that *יטוט* refers to the shaking of the foundations of the world is not "incongruous in the context," and the strained linguistic interpretations of the verse which he, in consequence of this opinion, is forced to make are unnecessary.) For the embellishment of the theme in rabbinic thought see, e. g., Yoma 38b on I Sam. 2:8 and Prov. 10:25. [See also 1 Q Isa.<sup>a</sup> 9:6.]

<sup>16</sup> For this meaning of *אני אמרתי . . . אכן* "Formerly I thought . . . but now circumstances make me reconsider" see Gunkel, pp. 134, 363

<sup>17</sup> The very same words *אתם אלהים אחרים* appear to epitomize the unlikely result of another test of divinity to which Yhwh puts the "other gods" in the equally dramatic passage of Isa. 41:21-24.

tree of life and eat and live forever!" "Knowing good and bad is one characteristic of the divine, living forever is another.<sup>18</sup> In a passage from a Ugaritic epic the goddess Anat offers immortality to Prince Aqht:

"Ask for life, O hero Aqht,  
ask for life, and I shall give it to you,  
for immortality, and I shall bestow it on you,"

and goes on to describe with words which clearly point to immortality as an attribute of the divine:

"I shall make you count years with Baal,  
you will count months with the son(s) of El."

In Aqht's answer, however, in rejection of the offer there is expressed, with equal clarity, the converse, namely, that decline that comes with old age<sup>19</sup> is the characteristic fate of man:

"I shall die the death of all (men),  
I, too, shall certainly die" (2 Aqht:VI:26-38).

The Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic has it very succinctly:

When the gods created mankind,  
they set apart death for mankind,  
but retained life in their own hands (X:3:3-5).

The decree, then, that the gods are to die spells their demotion: deprived of divinity they will fall like אחר השרים, that is to say, they will be deposed from office.

What is represented by אחר השרים, the class with whom, or which, the gods in their fall are compared?<sup>20</sup> Interpretations that go beyond the myth clearly present in this psalm, invoking extraneous myths

<sup>18</sup> There would be a symmetry as logically apt as poetically forceful if the psalmist has in mind that the failure of the gods to exercise the divine attribute of knowing good and bad in acts of judgment is here balanced by their being deprived of that other divine attribute — immortality.

<sup>19</sup> This is the likely interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> Ewald was the first to interpret the passage: "O princes, you will fall together," taking קאחר, repointed 'קאחד', as an adverbial phrase meaning "all at the same time," a meaning it has half a dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, e. g., Ezra 2:64 (cf. Ewald, *Die poetischen Bücher des Alten Bundes* II [1840 (since this, second ed)], p. 260). The following arguments militate against this proposal: '(1) כאחד "together" is probably translated from Aramaic כחדה ([L. Kohler-] W. Baumgartner, *Lex. Vet. Test. Lib.* [1953], p. 1073b; *Supplementum* [1957], p. 200b). Its acceptance for this verse would require a later date of the psalm than its content suggests. (The weakness of Baumgartner's claim for Akkadian origin [*Heb. u. aram. Lex. . .* (1967)],

for the explanation of this phrase, are beset with difficulties.<sup>21</sup> We are, therefore, well advised to reject these alternatives in favor of the common interpretation of אֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים as "any minister" or the like. The allusion may be to the ignominious end<sup>22</sup> of governors, princes, ministers, or generals, to which the Bible makes occasional reference (Isa. 43:28; Jer. 49:38; Hos. 7:16; 13:10 f.). Or it is possible that "minister" in juxtaposition to "man" constitutes a merismus, "commoner and prince," implying the whole of humankind.<sup>23</sup>

With vs. 7 the court scene ends. Pure dramatic description that the poem is up to this point, its inclusion in the Psalter would be an anomaly.<sup>24</sup> What makes this poem a psalm, i. e., an address in poetic form by man to God, is the last verse: "Arise, O 'Yhwh'. . . ." This verse has an importance, moreover, which goes beyond even the function of constituting the poem as a psalm. For it plays a key role in the answer to the question, "What specific genre confronts us in the psalm? Vss. 1-7 may present a free story like Job 1 f. or a report of a vision like I Kings 22 or Isa. 6. Now Job 1 f. or I Kings 22 and Isa. 6 are easily classified because their openings contain specific information (Job 1:1, 6; 2:1; I Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1). Such information, however, is lacking in Ps. 82. It is this difference which thrusts upon us the task of interpretation, and it is vs. 8 which yields the answer to the interpreter. A free story is not normally interrupted with a call to God; a vision not infrequently is (Isa. 6:8; Ezek. 9:8;

p. 29b] is clear from the rarity of the Akkadian expression; CAD, I/J, has one entry [p. 227b], and *AHW* none<sup>21</sup> (2) It destroys the obvious parallelism אֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים || בְּאָרְסֵי. Kissané, vol. 2, p. 58, bases his translation "suddenly" upon the same revocalization (יִזְכְּרְוּ אֶחָד), but כאָדָר does not have this meaning.

<sup>22</sup> J. Morgenstern has given the most elaborate one (*Heb. Un. Coll. Ann.* 14 [1939], pp. 73-126, especially pp. 73-75, 117). He translates the stich: ". . . as one of the leaders of the host of heaven shall ye fall (to earth)" (p. 117) and identifies the leader with Helel ben Šāḥar of Isa. 14:12. The psalm text hardly bears the weight of this complicated exegesis, and the anonymity in the frame of reference is disturbing, as Morgenstern himself admits: "'Like one of the *šarim*. . . ' is a bit vague and weak" (pp. 117 f., n. 167). If Ps. 82 in its mythology makes reference to another myth the name of whose chief protagonist (be it Helel ben Šāḥar or another) was generally known, this name could hardly remain unmentioned in our psalm passage because its bearer is to serve as an example (cf. Isa. 65:15); anonymous examples are not likely to be exemplars. Morgenstern would emend the text to read וְכִהְיִילִי וְכַחַד הַשָּׂרִים as against בְּ אֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים. This proposal reveals Morgenstern's awareness of the problem but is not, by that token, any the less self-serving. H. S. Nyberg's efforts in *Studien zum Hoseabuche* (1935), pp. 46 f., 124, need not detain us.

<sup>23</sup> נָפַל means "to experience disaster" as in Prov. 11:28; cf. 13:17 + בָּרַע; 17:20, 28:14 + בָּרַע; 11:5 + בָּרַעָה. The meaning may also apply in Ps. 5:11.

<sup>24</sup> So Dahood.

<sup>25</sup> There are, to be sure, some compositions in the Psalter, viz., wisdom poems, that are not psalms; cf. G. Fohrer, *Einleitung in das A.T.* (1965), p. 283

11:13; Amos 7:2, etc.). This consideration alone would point strongly to the conclusion that the verses in question are the report of a vision. In support of this we add the following: The verses betray no sign whatsoever of either narrative or narrative style. Beyond the short rubric of the opening verse there is no description of events or situations, no introduction of speaker or speakers and, notably, no use of waw consecutive.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, absent is the rhythm of narrative, that elusive quality which every fine author attempts to realize as he spins the sequence of events.

Vs. 8. We begin with the second part of this verse: "For all the nations are indeed Your property!" The passage is reminiscent of Deut. 32:8 f.:<sup>26</sup>

When the Most High apportioned the nations,  
when He set up the divisions of mankind,

He fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the sons of 'God' (or 'El').<sup>27</sup>

But<sup>28</sup> Yhwh's own allotment is His people,  
Jacob His apportioned property.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The existence of narrative features in reports of a visionary serving, as they do, to transmit his experience does not invalidate this observation. Nor is the isolation and analysis of simple forms put into question by the existence of mixed ones (e. g., Zech. 1:7-6:8).

<sup>26</sup> The relation has been commented on before, most elaborately by S. E. Loewenstamm in *דברים ש' לזכר ש' ישראל*. ספר ה' לחקר המקרא בישראל (1957/58), קק (120-123), 124.

<sup>27</sup> The received text has *ישראל* "Israel." The above translation follows the Hebrew Qumran fragment (P. W. Skehan, *Bull. of the Amer. Schools of Or. Res.* 136 [1954], p. 12) and the LXX (paraphrastic but nonetheless clearly reflecting the *Vorlage*; see also the Armenian daughter translation and part of the Aquila tradition, both rendered in Brooke and McLean's edition) in postulating *אל* (with *אלהים* as a less likely alternative) as the original text. The passage has been discussed by R. Meyer in *Verbannung und Heimkehr . . . W. Rudolph zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. A. Kuschke (1961), pp. 197-209.

<sup>28</sup> Adversative *כי* that is not in opposition to a preceding negation; so also in Isa. 28:28; Jer. 23:18; Ps. 44:23; (141:8?). This interpretation presupposes, for this text at least, the identity of *עליון* with *יהוה*, i. e., the former is a nominalized adjective and an epithet of the latter, and not the name of a separate and distinct deity. The second alternative is that of O. Eissfeldt (who, further, identifies *עליון* with *אל*; *Journ. of Semit. Stud.* 1 [1956], pp. 28 f. [English = *Kleine Schriften* 3 (1966), pp. 389 f., German]); but he seems to modify his opinion, granting that at the time of Deut. 32 concepts were in flux and that in vs. 43, at any rate, it is Yhwh to Whom the homage of all gods is due. This, however, is the same as saying that Yhwh is the "Most High."

<sup>29</sup> "Allotment" and "His apportioned property" are attempts to render *חלק* and *חבל נחלתו*. The roots *חבל*, *חלק*, *חבל* and *נחל* (all four occur in Micah 2:1-5, while

In the distant past, Yhwh, the Most High, divided mankind into nations, whose number He determined by the number of the sons of 'God/El', i. e., the minor gods; each of these gods received a nation as his portion (and, conversely, each nation received its tutelary deity [Deut. 4:19<sup>30</sup>]). Only one nation was not given over to these gods — Israel; that people Yhwh retained for Himself.<sup>31</sup>

Ps. 82 shares with Deut. 32 this myth as background, even to the point of using the same significant vocabulary.<sup>32</sup> Like the rest of the psalm, the last verse, too, is grounded in the myth, but it goes beyond it, for it asks the consummation of the decree. The visionary, having witnessed the judgment against the gods, realizes that the implementation of the decree is not immediately effective; it is a thing of the future ("you will fall," vs. 7). At this moment, the unpredictable happens. Overwhelmed by his fear of a delay of unknown duration<sup>33</sup> he, the bystander, calls into the court: "Arise, O 'Yhwh,' judge the earth!" This is not that personal call for help on the part of the psalmists we meet so frequently in the psalms,<sup>34</sup> but an imploring of God to take over the regimen of an unfragmented world — now; an entreaty that He administer justice undiluted and without delay, "for all the nations are indeed [His] property." When God established the existing order, He turned over to others<sup>35</sup> part of what was His. It never ceased to

---

the Deuteronomy passage has the last three but not the first root) belong to the same semantic field of vested property (cf. F. Horst in *Verbannung und Heimkehr* [cf. supra, n. 27], pp. 135-152, A. Malamat, *Journ. of the Amer. Or. Soc.* 82 [1962], pp. 147-150).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. supra, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup> This concept presented no difficulties to ancient Israel. At various times and places in the Near East, there were large or medium-size states, of which Assyria is the best known example, into which smaller states had been merged. The head of the empire, the Great King, was at the same time, in a particular sense, the king of that political unit with which he or his dynasty had had the longest and most intimate relation, a fact which is sometimes reflected in his titles.

<sup>32</sup> "Sons" or "assembly of" אֱלֹהִים; בְּנֵי "of 'God'" or "the Most High"; נָחַל; עֲלִיּוֹן; נִיִּים. The feature of identical words and phrases becomes even more noteworthy when a quantitative analysis is made, comparing a total of only six distichs (Deut. 32:8 f; Ps. 82:1, 6, 8) which contain 19 words in Deuteronomy and 23 in Psalms.

<sup>33</sup> M. Buber in his essay on this psalm says: "God pronounces sentence upon them, i. e., the gods, and . . . with God there is no division between sentence and execution" (*Good and Evil* [1953], p. 29; in the original: *Recht und Unrecht* . . . [1952], p. 37). This apodictic statement does not hold true; for example, God rejected Saul (I Sam. 15), but the latter continued to rule for quite some time (to I Sam. 31).

<sup>34</sup> אָמֵן has this meaning eight of the ten times it occurs in the Psalter; the exceptions are this passage and 132:8.

<sup>35</sup> "Apportioned," causative of נָחַל (Deut. 32:8).

be His; may He, then, today reenter into His own.<sup>36</sup> The present order of the divided world, governed by deputies wielding delegated power, is disintegrating because of inner contradictions: O God, why do You delay? Sweep away the phantasms! Assert Yourself as the one and immediate ruler and judge.

Ps. 82 must be seen as a historic psalm, historic in the sense that, whatever its date, the thought expressed in it represents a watershed in the history of ideas. The poem presents two views of the gods, an earlier one and a later one, the former and prevailing one yielding dramatically to the new and true one. What is remarkable is that the conclusion expressed in this psalm's poetic imagery, particularly in the epitome of the heavenly verdict, sets the course for future religious development, true though it be that a charting of that course would reveal not a straight line but a tortuous curve.<sup>37</sup> The psalm, then, is historic not for its recording of history but because of the importance of its contribution to the making of history. The psalmist, as he prays for the speedy realization of the verdict, sets history in motion, at the same time that his uttered prayer — this psalm — becomes a document and as such acts itself as a historiogonic keryx.

It would hardly be productive to attempt here to determine whether the idea represented in Ps. 82 owes its inspiration to prophecy or itself constituted a source of prophetic thought; the psalm's prophetic features are nonetheless impressive. It centers on a vision of the divine council, the visionary responds to the judgment made in that council, and judgment and response together herald the end of paganism.

#### ADDENDUM

Modern biblical exegesis frequently links Ps. 82 with 58, a link made possible by changing the pointing of incongruous אֱלִים (58:2) to 'אֱלִים', a defective spelling for אֱלִים "gods." Sometimes, though, the connection is only superficial. Formerly it was often said that this word, so revocalized, might be a reference to rulers, priests, and the like, but this is now generally recognized as unsupportable.<sup>38</sup> G. R. Driver, therefore, assumes a doubly defective spelling, viz., 'אֱלִים'

<sup>36</sup> Simple stem of נחל (Ps. 82:8).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Dan. 10:13 and for the vast postbiblical literature L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* V (1925), p. 205, as well as the many references in VII (1938), p. 197b, to "Guardian angel(s) of . . ."; E. F. Urbach, פרקי אמונות ודעות, חז"ל (1969), p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gunkel

for אֵלִים "rams," but occasionally designating "chiefs, nobles," e. g., Exod. 15:15.<sup>39</sup> By either reading the psalmist is understood as rebuking the nobles, from whose ranks the judges come, for perverting justice. Ps. 58 so interpreted would share two features with Ps. 82: a concern for justice and the conclusion with a prayer for its establishment on earth.

But this gain of the change of vocalization is insignificant. The two psalms remain unrelated in any particular and characteristic way. Moreover, Driver's interpretation of 58:2 is not fully satisfactory. While it makes sense in its immediate context, that is hardly the case when the verse is seen as part of the whole psalm. The verse in question, the opening of the poem, corresponds with vs. 12, the closing verse, at least in the matter of the judgment of man. Now the second half of the latter, "Verily, there is a God who judges on earth," ceases to be a pallid generality (which it would be in isolation) once it is seen as serving as a contrast to the question raised in the first distich, "Do you really . . . judge man equitably?" The end of the psalm asserts the existence of a God Who judges equitably in specific reply to the doubting of the reality of divine justice at its beginning. This doubt, to be sure, arises because of "the gods," who are not properly performing the function of judges;<sup>40</sup> but this is the case only if 'אֱלֹהִים' "gods" is the reading and rendering in vs. 2.

As likely as the latter change of pointing and the translation are, however, and, by consequence, as easy as it is to note an essential similarity in the two psalms (i. e., the common feature of the gods' failure to judge), it is advisable to interpret Ps. 82 independently and without any appeal to a psalm whose particular interpretation hangs, in the last analysis, by the slender thread of one revocalized word. Now that we have done just that, however, we proceed to a comparison of the two psalms in order to bring into higher relief what is characteristic of, and intended by, Ps. 82.

### PSALM 58

- 1 To the Musicmaster. (According to) "Do not Destroy"  
A Mikhtam of David
- 2 Do you really pronounce just verdicts, you 'gods'?<sup>41</sup>  
Do you judge men equitably?

<sup>39</sup> *Journ. of Theol. Stud.* 43 (1942), p. 157. Dahood, vol. 2, p. 57, seeks to support this interpretation with additional revocalization.

<sup>40</sup> So, approximately Gunkel.

<sup>41</sup> 'אֱלֹהִים'; cf. supra.

- 3 Quite the contrary!<sup>42</sup> In your heart you devise wrongs.  
(and) in the world<sup>43</sup> you gloat<sup>44</sup> over the violence you wreak.
- 4 From the womb the wicked are estranged,<sup>45</sup>  
from their birth the peddlers of lies do err.
- 5 Like the (very) serpent's venom is their venom,  
as that<sup>46</sup> of a deaf snake that stops up its ear  
6 so that it may not hear the charmers' voice,  
nor even that of the enchanter most cunning.
- 7 O God, break off the teeth in their mouth,  
smash the lions' fangs, O Yhwh!
- 8 Let them dissolve (becoming) like water that runs off,  
'like trodden grass'<sup>47</sup> let them wither.
- 9-10 . . .<sup>48</sup>
- 11 The just will rejoice because he sees vengeance,  
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.
- 12 And people will say, "Verily, there is a reward for the just;<sup>49</sup>  
verily, there is a God Who judges on earth."

In spite of its textual perplexities, the psalm as a whole is not difficult. The three divisions are easily recognized. The first (vss. 2-3) is an address to the gods; the second (vss. 4-6) describes the world as their bailiwick; the third (vss. 7-12) is a prayer to God to crush the wicked and make justice of divinity believable on earth.

<sup>42</sup> אר; cf. 44:10: "yet" (cf. L. Köhler[-W. Baumgartner], *Lev. Vel. Test. Lib.* [1953], p. 74b, no. 4).

<sup>43</sup> I. e., in actuality. First the gods devise the evil in their minds and then sit content to observe its realization in the world. It is the same sequence as in the preceding verse: first conception (הרברון), then actualization (תשפט).

<sup>44</sup> תפלטון. The root, meaning "to behold," is frequent in Akkadian. It is commonly used in the N-stem, which, if followed for Hebrew, would yield תפלטון, but the basic stem also occurs in Akkadian, and speculation about the proper conjugation of the Hebrew form is pointless. What the stich says of the gods is the opposite of what Habakkuk says of Yhwh: You are "too pure of eye to gaze with equanimity upon evil and You cannot bear to look on wrong" (1:13).

<sup>45</sup> זרו. Frequently emended to 'נורו' (e. g., Gunkel), but unnecessarily so (cf. Delitzsch). The nifal form in Isa. 1:4 and Ezek. 14:5 is of similar intent. Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (1958 ff.), p. 301, for a somewhat different meaning.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Dahood.

<sup>47</sup> Read with Buttenwieser, 'כמו הצר דרך'.

<sup>48</sup> Unexplained. The verses seem to continue the imprecation of vs. 8, mainly by adding further similes.

<sup>49</sup> פרי לצדיק. Cf. Isa. 3:10 f. (||וּמֹלֵךְ); Prov. 11:30 f. (attracting יְשָׁלֵם).

(1) The address to the gods is scornful to the point of being sardonic: How can justice ever come from you, who perpetrate wickedness? (vss. 2-3). (2) Indeed, the world as it is, is testimony to the rule of the gods — the wicked flourish (vss. 4-6). These latter, having the gods as their patrons, seem proof against ordinary counter-measures. This is expressed in the simile of protection against the snake.<sup>50</sup> Normally one can counter poisonous snakes by recourse to a magic spell, but if a snake knows how to stop its ears against the spell, both the spell and the one who casts it are impotent<sup>51</sup> (vss. 5-6). (3) In this seemingly hopeless situation the psalmist turns to God. He does not ask for an antidote; God is no technician, possibly to be outwitted by a still cleverer manipulator. Only the breaking of the poisonous teeth of the liars will end their menace. Once deprived of the source of their power, they will disintegrate (vss. 7 f.[-10]). When this will come about, man, who has become uncertain of God's responsibility and competence, will again experience the presence of God, the judge and ruler (vss. 11 f.).

This interpretation makes clear the similarity of Ps. 58 to Ps. 82. Hardly less clear is the difference between the two. Ps. 58 is concerned in theme and intention solely with the contemporaneous. The order of the author's aeon is disturbed but is capable of being adjusted, and it is for this adjustment that the psalmist prays. He implores God to secure justice in the world and thereby to remove the temptation to faithlessness.<sup>52</sup> The author of Ps. 82, by contrast, has despaired of his present; justice cannot be secured in it. And for all that the very limitation of God's government is part of the divine plan, he is impatient with this limitation and entreats God to remove it, to end the present order with dispatch, and to establish a new one in its place, His own kingdom.

<sup>50</sup> The snake is an old symbol of evil speaking. In the Hittite-Akkadian bilingual political testament of Hattusilis I (middle of the 17th century) the queen, who instigated rebellion, i. e., faithlessness, is called "serpent" (I:10, 20).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Eccl. 10.11, Jer. 8:17; Akkad. *sēru lā šipti* "spell-immune snake" (see *CAD*, Š, p. 148b).

<sup>52</sup> The gods are not mentioned again after the beginning. Presumably, they are left in their positions and will have to be rebuked again when corruption becomes unbearable.