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A Review of Ancient Religions IV—The Hebrew Religion II

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The two things referred to in the closing lines of the preceding chapter, as having to do with the nature of the Deity revealed in the Hebrew scriptures, are, first, *Deity*—plural or singular; and the second has to do with the “form” of God. Here we take up the first.

The interpretation of “Elohim.”^a The Hebrew word “Elohim” used in Genesis is plural; and if literally translated the passage in the creation story would read: “In the beginning Elohim (the Gods) created the heavens and the earth . . . And the Spirit of Elohim ⟨the Spirit of the Gods⟩, moved upon the face of the waters; and Elohim ⟨the Gods⟩ said, let there be light, and there was light” (cf. Gen. 1:1-3). And so it follows throughout the story of creation. It is quite generally conceded by scholars that Elohim is of plural form—(of which the singular is “Eloah”)—and represents more than one. A variety of devices **has** been employed to explain away this use of the plural form of the noun in the first chapter of Genesis, and to make it conform to “the one only God” idea. Some Jews, in explanation of it, and in defense of their belief in “one only God,” hold that there are several Hebrew words that have a plural form, but are singular in meaning, of which “Elohim” is one. They

^aThis section is a summary of Roberts’s lengthy and documented discussion of the meaning of *Elohim* in *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 139–47, and *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 3:211–12. Roberts has for the most part summarized an argument that has not changed in recent years. Scholars have always conceded the word *Elohim* to be a plural. Most often however it takes a singular verb reflecting that at some point in time it was understood to be a singular divine name. On the other hand, there are several times in the Hebrew Bible when *Elohim* occurs accompanied by a plural verb or adjective in reference to the God of Israel (Gen. 20:13; 35:7; Ex. 32:4, 8; 2 Sam. 7:23; Ps. 58:11). For recent scholarly discussion, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “God, Names of,” 7:679; and Martin Rose, “Names of God in the Old Testament,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:1006–7.

quote as proof of this word “maim,” meaning water; “shamaim,” meaning heaven; “panim,” meaning the face or surface of a person or thing. “But,” says a Christian Jewish scholar, the Reverend H. Highton, M.A. and Fellow of Queens College, Oxford—

But, if we examine these words we shall find that though apparently they may have a singular meaning, yet in reality they have a plural and collective one; thus, for instance, “maim” water, means a collection of waters, forming one collective whole; and thus again, “shamaim,” heaven, is also in reality, as well as in form, of the plural number, meaning what we call in a general way in English, “the heavens,” “comprehending all the various regions which are included under that title.”¹

Other Jewish scholars content themselves in accounting for this inconvenient plural in the opening chapter of Genesis by saying that in the Hebrew, “Elohim” (the Gods) better represents the idea of strong, and mighty, than the singular form would, and for this reason it was used, a view accepted by many Christians, Dr. Elliot, Professor of Hebrew in Laffayette College, Easton, Pa., says: “⟨The name⟩ Elohim is the generic name of God, and, being plural in form, is probably a plural of excellence and majesty.”²

Rabbi Jehuda Hallevi (12th Century) found

in the usage of ⟨the plural⟩ *Elohim* a ⟨process⟩ [protest] against idolaters, who call each personified power *eloab*, and all collectively “Elohim.” He interpreted it as the most general name of the Deity, distinguishing Him as manifested in the exhibition of his power, without reference to his personality or moral qualities, or any special relation which He bears to man.³

Havernick derives the word “Elohim” from a Hebrew record now lost, “Caluit,”^b and thinks that the plural is used merely to indicate the abundance and super-richness contained in the divine Being.⁴

¹H. Highton, “God: A Unity and Plurality,” *Voice of Israel* (February 1844), cited in Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 139.

²Elliott, *Vindication of the Mosaic Authorship*, 65.

³Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Jehovah,” 1241-42.

^bThis is an error in reading from Havernick’s article “God” in Kitto’s *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*, which renders the Hebrew root ‘-l-b (the same root as *Eloab*) as *eoluit*. The type for the letter *e* looks like a *c*, hence Roberts copied *Coluit*. This is most likely a simple transcription error, for Roberts did not know Hebrew; the same error occurs in *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 140.

⁴Kitto, *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature* 1:777.

Christian scholars' interpretation of "Elohim." A number of Christian scholars attempt to account for the plural "Elohim" by saying that it "foreshadows the doctrine of the Christian Trinity!" That is, it recognizes the existence of the three persons in one God.

It is expressive of omnipotent power; and by its use here [Gen. 1] in the plural form, is obscurely taught at the opening of the Bible, a doctrine clearly (referred to) [revealed] in other parts of it, viz., that though God is one, there is a plurality of persons in the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit, who were engaged in the creative work.⁵

This view was maintained at length by Reverend H. Highton in the *Christian Jewish Periodical*, "The Voice of Israel." ~~Before quoting~~ ***But*** Calvin, Mercer, Dresius, Ballarmine," says Dr. Hackett of the Theological Institution of Newton, Mass., Editor of Smith's Bible Dictionary, "have given the weight of their authority against an explanation so fanciful and arbitrary." Others explain the use of the plural "we" or "us" by saying that in the first chapter of Genesis, Moses represents God as speaking of himself in that manner in imitation of the custom of kings who speak of themselves as "we" instead of the singular "I." In other words, it is "the royal" "we" or "us." This theory, however, is answered, as pointed out by Rev. H. Highton, by the fact that the use of what is called the "royal plural" is a modern, not an ancient custom, and refers to the usage of the kings of the Bible, which discloses the fact that they always spoke of themselves as "I" or "me."

Bible use of plural form—"Gods." Throughout, these several suggestions take on a sort of confession and avoidance of a rather stern fact, namely that a plurality of divine persons were engaged in the creation, according to the use of the word "Elohim" in the Hebrew scriptures. In addition to the use of the plural form "Elohim" (the Gods) however, there is the further fact that when Elohim contemplated the creation of man, "Elohim said: Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness." Nor is that the whole of the story. In other parts of the Old Testament writings occur other pluralistic expressions which indicate the existence of a plurality of deities, though doubtless, harmonized Intelligences all, so that really but one mind, a community mind, enters into the plan of creation and of the government of the world.

Some of these expressions referred to are as follows:

"The Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords." That is from Moses (Deut. 10:17).

⁵Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary* (Gen. 1:1-2).

“The Lord God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know.” That is from Joshua (Josh. 22:22).

“O give thanks unto the God of gods. . . . O give thanks unto the Lord of lords.” That is from David (Ps. 136:2–3).

“And shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods.” That is from Daniel (Dan. 11:36).

“God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods.” “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.” That is from David again (Ps. 82:1, 6).

Were such expressions taken from the lips of pagan kings, or false prophets who are sometimes represented as speaking in the scriptures, we might question the force of such quotations as representing a multiplicity of divine Intelligences—Gods. But coming, as they do, from recognized prophets and servants of God, who may deny the force of the testimony they give to the truth that is here contended for, namely, a multiplicity of divine Intelligences, harmonized into a community mind, and which, though taking counsel in knowledge and wisdom, control and direct the affairs of the universes in perfect harmony?

The conviction of reason on plurality of presiding Intelligences—Gods. Far stronger, however, as affecting this question of a multiplicity of divine ruling Intelligences in the universe—far stronger than all the pluralistic references in the scriptures concerning the Elohim (the Gods), will be the consciousness of that truth that must rise in the mind of man as he contemplates the vastness of the universe, and the great number of suns, extending into thousands of millions, some of them—and likely most of them—peopled by sentient and intelligent inhabitants. **Also further that** many of these inhabitants, without doubt superior Intelligences to those we have known in our earth; Intelligences who have subdued the worlds given to them as habitations, and which they have carried into immensely higher states of social order and excellence than we know, and whose affairs are governed by councils of Intelligences rising in gradation of power and authority over worlds and world-groups, and these groups gathered into immense empires of orderly worlds, all governed by harmonized Intelligences who have partaken of the one God-Nature. These governing Intelligences are incarnations of that Nature, of all the qualities or attributes of it, for in them, and in each of them, “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9). These, gathered into assemblies and into councils, constitute David’s congregation of the “Mighty Ones”—the Gods of eternity, and of the universe. Not distraught and divided and confused, but harmonized into One-ness

that makes our universe, though pluralistic in its nature, yet also “uni-verse”: A “uni-verse” where system obtains, where orderly government controls, where all things exist under “a reign of law.”

“And the Spirit of God”—Deity viewed as unity. Proceeding forth from these divine and harmonized Intelligences, the Gods, as rays of light, vibrate from our sun and from all the thousands of millions of suns of the universe to give us cosmic light and cosmic power, so from the presence of these divine Intelligences proceeds the spirit of the Gods, “to fill the immensity of space” (D&C 88:12); becoming God Omniscient, God Omnipotent, and God Omnipresent in the world; everywhere present, and everywhere present with knowledge, and everywhere present with power; with power to act, power to be self-moving; power to move other things than self; creative power in fact; upholding power; intelligence-inspiring-power; vital force—a mighty ocean of Being, extending God everywhere; holding within its ocean of Being all that is—A spirit proceeding from, and yet ever ~~returning~~ **united** to its source—the divine, harmonized Intelligences of the universe! All this is told in the first unmarred verses of Genesis:

In the beginning the Gods created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of the Gods moved upon the face of the waters. And the Gods said, Let there be light: and there was light. . . . And the Gods said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (cf. Gen. 1:1-3, 26)^c

In other words, as in each of the great created classes of animals we are repeatedly told, they were created, and were to reproduce each “after his kind”; so man was produced, after his kind: He, the offspring of God.

“These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth *when* they were created, in the day (i.e. in the period) that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 2:4).

It is not difficult, with this large vision of the universe and its **innu-**merable Intelligences before us as set forth in previous chapters—it is not difficult, I say, to understand how that in the creation of our little earth in the universe, a plurality of Divine Personages were united in directing its organization, and decreeing the lines of its development, and these Intelligences were the incarnation of all that is known as Deity, ***each one of them***; and doubtless were the Intelligences known as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can understand now that “as

^cRoberts paraphrases these verses, adding the words “the Gods” (as found in Abraham 4) in place of the singular “God” found in Genesis.

pertaining to us,” there is indeed but these—one Godhead! And in being loyal to this Godhead, incarnated in that Trinity, or divine council, and in each one of that Trinity, God and the fullness of God, even as such “fullness of the Godhead bodily,” was said to have dwelt in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:9). And in being loyal to them—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—we shall be loyal to all that is or can be included in that greatest of all generalization—God!

The form of God.^d The second matter we promised to consider here, and having to do with the form of God, is a question much debated through the ages; and pertinent here to our unfolding truth. That, too, is determined in the Hebrew scriptures, the “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (Gen. 1:26, 27). It must follow, as clearly as the night the day, if God created man in his own image, then God also is in the image ***or form*** of man. I know there has accumulated a lot of theological rubbish about this scripture meaning man being created in the “moral image” of God—meaning consciousness, intelligence, and will; and limiting what should be a full length portrait of Deity—including mind qualities, and also physical form—to this so-called “moral image.” This limitation is the work of the theologians, an assumption purely without authority of the revelation itself.

When the same terms are used in another chapter of Genesis, we have no difficulty in understanding the significance of them, viz: “And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth” (Gen. 5:3). The unstrained meaning of which is **that** Seth was like unto his father; and in like manner the creation of man “in the image and likeness of God,” should be understood.

All through the revelation contained in the Old Testament this truth is iterated and reiterated. It occurs in nearly all the passages in which God as a person, is unveiled. It was so in the visitation of divine beings to Abraham in the Plains of Mamre, when the three “men” came into his tent, one of whom is always spoken of as “the Lord,” who conversed with Abraham in the most familiar terms, and even partook of the Patriarch’s food! (Gen. 18).^e

^dThis is a summary of Roberts’s lengthy argument about the anthropomorphic form of God found in his *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 69–91, and *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 3:200–206.

^eRoberts’s interpretation of the Lord coming to Abraham as one of the “three men” seems to square with the simplest reading of the Hebrew text in which three messengers come to Abraham. The Lord, apparently one of the messengers, speaks

Jacob's contact with a divine personage is equally vividly described, and with all evidence of physical contact. Jacob sought to learn the name of his visitor, but it was not revealed. Nevertheless, he blessed Jacob, and Jacob called the name of the place of his experience, Peniel, "for," he said, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30).^f

There surely was physical manifestation of God unto Israel both in Mt. Sinai and later to a special company made up of Moses and his inner council, and "seventy of the Elders of Israel," for it is recorded:

Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet . . . as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink. (Ex. 24:9-11)^g

And this in the presence of the Lord.

Summing up the experiences of Israel at Sinai, and the giving of the law, Moses reminds Israel in his recital of those events that

the Lord spake unto all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more. And he ⟨the Lord⟩ wrote them ⟨his commandments⟩ in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me. (Deut. 5:22; see also Ex. 4-5)

"The Lord talked with you," he said again, "face to face . . . out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 5:4).

What shall I say more? Joshua, during the siege of Jericho, beheld a personage in the form of a man with drawn sword in hand, and asked him, "Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?" "Nay," said the personage,

with Abraham, and then only two, presumably the mortals, leave to go to Sodom and Gomorrah. But this interpretation presents the theological problem as to whether a spirit being, Jesus Christ, would have eaten. JST Gen. 19:1 changes the number of the messengers who leave from two to three suggesting none were the Lord. In addition Joseph Fielding Smith taught, perhaps in response to Roberts, "We are not justified in teaching that our Heavenly Father, with other heavenly persons, came down dusty and weary, and ate with Abraham." *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56), 1:16.

^fGenesis 32:30. Roberts apparently also interpreted Jacob's wrestling with a divine being as indicating the anthropomorphism of God. Joseph Fielding Smith interpreted this passage as a reference to a mortal: "Later in this chapter when Jacob said he had beheld the Lord, that did not have reference to his wrestling." Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:17.

^gRoberts omitted the words "as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone." The clearness describes the sapphire pavement.

“but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come.” And Joshua paid him divine honors by an act of worship—“And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship. . . . And the captain of the Lord’s host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so” (Josh. 5:13–15).

Isaiah, prophet par excellence, “saw [also] the Lord [sitting] upon a throne, high and lifted up.” And in his ecstasy, and yet in humility, he cried out, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:1, 5).

These are visions of other prophets and seers in Israel to the same effect. The revelations of the Old Testament are full of the anthropomorphism, but the climax of its demonstration must be necessarily reserved for a later chapter when dealing with the supplemental phase of the Hebrew revelation found in the New Testament, and in the mission of Messiah of the Old Testament revealed in Christ Jesus of the New Testament.^h

^hSee chapter 19 of this volume.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*; Smith, “King Follett Discourse”; Smith, *History of the Church* 1:473–79.