

## **God and “Gods” — Poetic Ambiguity and Wordplay: A Proposal towards a Better Understanding of Ps 82**

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### **Introduction**

In Ps 82 God speaks in the first person and, through a series of rhetorical questions and exhortations, pronounces judgment on the “gods”<sup>1</sup> (vv. 1b, 6–7) who pervert social justice (vv. 2–4). The fall of the “gods” proves that authority and power are insufficient to secure one’s rule in the world. In contrast to them, God is the everlasting Judge because He acts with integrity and compassion (vv. 1, 8).

Although the psalm poses no textual or linguistic problems, a brief look at the commentaries shows that scarcely any psalm has received a more diverse interpretation than Ps 82. This is due to difficulty of determination of the precise meaning of certain key words and expressions in the psalm, which seemingly permit of more than one connotation. This kind of difficulty or uncertainty is encountered right at the beginning of the psalm, in v. 1, and continues until the end of the psalm, particularly in vv. 6–7. The words of Hans-Joachim Kraus can be used to express the overall impression about the psalm that is conveyed by the general disagreement among the biblical scholars about the

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, like in the NIV, quotation marks are added to *gods* in vv. 1b and 6, but these are not found in the Hebrew text (quotation marks do not appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible). The function of these quotation marks is to indicate that the word is being used in a sense different from its usual one and its other occurrences in vv. 1a and 8 (where the word evidently depicts the God of Israel).

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psalm's meaning: "Psalm 82 is of such exceptional character in the Psalter that it could well be impossible to provide interpretations that are in every respect satisfactory."<sup>2</sup>

The most puzzling moment in the psalm is the identity of the "gods" (*'elohim*) in vv. 1b and 6. The word *'elohim* is mentioned four times in this short psalm, clearly depicting the God of Israel in vv. 1a and 8. However, its meaning in vv. 1b and 6 is obviously different and puzzling: Does *'elohim* denote supernatural beings, namely the pagan gods (such as, for example, Pss 86:8; 96:4-5; 97:7, 9) or angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 8:5)? Or, does it convey the notion of human authorities who acted in God's name, referring to native Israelite judges and leaders (Exod 4:16; 21:6<sup>3</sup>; 22:28 [NIV, in the note]; 1 Sam 2:25; 2 Sam 19:27)? Or, does it reflect some ancient Near Eastern practices to idolize kings and view them as incarnate deities, denoting the kings of the nations?<sup>4</sup> Or, does *'elohim* express the notion of "the mighty ones," referring to local and/or foreign oppressors, who are often mentioned in the Psalms (e.g., Pss 52:1; 69:4; 135:10; 136:18)? The meaning of *'adat 'el* ("the assembly of God") in v. 1 is also uncertain. The identity of the *'elohim* in vv. 1b and 6 is crucial to the understanding of this phrase and of the whole psalm.

This study proposes to alleviate some of the difficulties of Ps 82 by reading them as an intentional poetic ambiguity which causes readers to reassess as they read.<sup>5</sup> Paul R. Raabe argues that sometimes "a word,

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1989), 155.

<sup>3</sup> The KJV, NKJV, and NIV render *'elohim* as "the judges" in Exod 21:6. The NASB and NJPS list this option in the note. The RSV, ESV, NASB, and NJPS have "God."

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the ANE views of some kings as deities see, for example, Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1978), 225-226, 263.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion about and possible examples of deliberate ambiguity in the Psalter, see, for example, Patrick D. Miller, Jr. "Poetic Ambiguity and Balance in Psalm XV" *VT* 29/4 (1979): 416-424; Paul R. Raabe, "Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter," *JBL* 110/2 (1991): 213-227. The various types of ambiguity (e.g., lexical, phonetic, and grammatical) are long known in literary theory (e.g., W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [Edinburgh: Constable, 1930]; W. B. Stanford, *Ambiguity in Greek Literature: Studies in Theory and Practice* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1939]; M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* [New York: 1971], 8-10; S. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1962], 156-192, which Miller and Raabe cite). Raabe seeks to determine when ambiguity in the Psalms is deliberate (Raabe, 213-214, 226-227). For a similar approach to some other biblical texts, see, for example, John Kselman, "Ambiguity

phrase, or sentence could be understood in two (or more) ways because both were intended.”<sup>6</sup> Poetic ambiguity is deliberate, namely it inherently lies in the text and is supported by the context, and is not the result of the reader’s misunderstanding. The term “ambiguity” should be understood as conveying the multivalence and the puzzling nature of the text without the negative connotation of deceitfulness that the term often carries.<sup>7</sup> I would like to suggest here that poetic ambiguity should not be regarded as a burden to the study of the biblical text, but rather as the possibility for an enriched interpretation of the psalm. Harvey Minkoff points out that “[p]erhaps deliberate ambiguity may contain theological significance.”<sup>8</sup> This means that overlooking or undermining the psalmist’s deliberate ambiguity may result in one-sided or incomplete understanding of the psalm.

The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to attempt to demonstrate deliberate poetic ambiguity in Ps 82, and 2) to show that deliberate poetic ambiguity in Ps 82, if it exists, is not simply an expression of the poet’s artistic creativity, but conveys also the theological message of the psalm. The following steps are undertaken to meet this purpose: 1) briefly look at the main interpretations of the psalm, 2) discuss the literary technique of poetic ambiguity in the Psalms, 3) discern possible poetic ambiguity in the psalm, and 4) understand Ps 82 theologically in the light of deliberate poetic ambiguity.

### **The Main Interpretations of Ps 82**

Attention is given, and only briefly, to four main interpretations of the psalm. In recent times most authors interpret the “gods” in vv. 1b and 6 as the gods of the nations, assuming the mythological background of the psalm. They argue that the psalm resembles the ancient Canaanite myth of god El ruling over the lower gods. The gods were condemned by Israel’s God in the supreme heavenly court because they failed to embody His demand for justice. The imagery of the pagan pantheon of gods (*’adat ’el*, “the assembly of God”) is used to dramatically portray God’s sovereignty over all powers and His judgment on the rule of evil

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and Wordplay in Proverbs XI” *VT* 52/4 (2002): 545-548; Benjamin J. M. Johnson, “‘Whoever Gives Me Thorns and Thistles’: Rhetorical Ambiguity and the Use of *תן מי* in Isaiah 27:2–6,” *JSOT* 36/1 (2011): 105-126.

<sup>6</sup> Raabe, 213.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Harvey Minkoff, “A Theological Reason for Ambiguity,” *JBQ* 28/4 (2000): 246.

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in the world.<sup>9</sup> The advocates of this view often render the Hebrew participle *nitsab* (“standing”) and the preposition *be* (“in”) as “presides over” in support of the view that Israel’s God is the presiding deity over the council of gods.<sup>10</sup> Some authors suggest that the psalm reflects the ongoing shift from polytheistic worldview to firm monotheism in ancient Israel’s thought.<sup>11</sup> Following a similar line of interpretation, some authors believe that “gods” are the guardian angels of the nations.<sup>12</sup>

An overtly mythological reading of the psalm raises the question of how the psalm was understood by the ancient Israelites. The polytheistic view of the world was unacceptable to Israelite firm monotheism (Deut 4:35, 39; Ps 96:5). Yet the psalmists “used the thought forms, the language, the images that were given to them out of their environment,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (translated by H. Hartwell; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 556–561; Mitchell S. J. Dahood, *Psalms*. 3 vols. Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 17a:268–271; J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 51–100*, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164–165; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 120–124; Kraus, 155–158; J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 122–124; Idem, “The Book of Psalms,” in *1&2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols., The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 4:1006–1008; Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 340–341; James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 268–271; Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 270–273; Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, Critical Eerdmans Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 588–591; Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 291–293; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 623–627; Beth Tanner, “Psalm 82: King of the Gods,” in *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 641–644.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive study of many Old Testament passages (including Ps 82) in the light of their possible Canaanite (Ugaritic) parallels, see, for example, E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 24 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980). For an overview of the main mythological interpretations of Ps 82 and a useful bibliography, see James M. Trotter, “Death of the אלהים in Psalm 82,” *JBL* 131/2 (2012): 221–239.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Miller, 121–122; Davidson, 271–272.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Elmer B. Smick, “Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms,” *WTJ* 44/1 (1982), 96; Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart: an Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 168–175.

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but they used them and transformed them in the service of a particular view of the intention and purpose of God in the human community.”<sup>13</sup> Artur Weiser points out that the fact that the “gods” now stand before the judgment seat of God “shows how little the psalm is spiritually tied to the polytheistic root of the conception it here adopts.”<sup>14</sup> It is thus possible that the psalmist in his poetic expression describes here an imaginative, symbolical trial rather than a literal event in heaven. If this notion is correct, the goal of the psalm is to highlight the notion that the gods of the nations are worthless, lifeless idols, and not “gods” at all (Pss 86:8; 96:5; 97:7). Like certain other psalms, Ps 82 depicts them as “gods” (*'elohim*) in order to highlight the sovereignty, uniqueness, and majesty of the God of Israel who will destroy them (Pss. 95:3; 97:7; 135:5; 136:2).

According to another view, *'elohim* (“gods”) refers to the members of the celestial council presided over by the Lord (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; Isa 14:12). The proponents of this view argue that “the congregation of the mighty” (*'adat 'el*, “the assembly of God”) in v. 1 refers to the heavenly assembly or body of counselors that we encounter in 1 Kgs 22:19–22 (*tseba' hashamayim*, “the host of heaven”) and Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7 (*bene ha'elohim*, “the sons of God”).<sup>15</sup>

An older interpretation interprets *'elohim* (“gods”) as human judges and leaders who are answerable to God, the Supreme Judge.<sup>16</sup> According to this view, “the congregation of the mighty” (*'adat 'el*, “the assembly of God”) refers to the assembly of Yahweh (*'adat yhw*) (Num 27:17; Jos 22:17–18) or the assembly of Israel (*'adat yisra'el*) (1 Kgs 8:5; 2 Chron 5:6), namely the assembly of God’s people. The advocates of this view argue that vv. 2–4 provide the interpretative key for the understanding of the “gods” (*'elohim*) and the opening scene in v. 1. The primary task of the “gods” as described in vv. 2–4 is to maintain social

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Weiser, 558.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Cyrus H. Gordon, “אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*,” *JBL* 54 (1935): 139–144; Roger T. O’Callaghan, “A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82,” *CBQ* 15/5 (1953), 313–314; Tate, 335; Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, 15–16 vols., Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 305–308.

<sup>16</sup> For example, F. Delitzsch, “Fifth Book of the Psalter, Ps. cxx–cxxxiv,” in *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 5:400–404; John Calvin, quoted in Kraus, 155.

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justice. In other words, the sphere of their domain is the earth (vv. 5, 8). The charges listed in vv. 2–4 echo the laws of the Torah, identifying the “gods” more precisely as the judges and leaders of Israel (Deut 1:16, 17; 16:18–20). These charges are “precisely what the Judean king is entrusted with in Psalm 72 (see especially 72:1–7, 12–14).”<sup>17</sup> The terminology of the judicial procedure here employed is precisely same as in numerous Psalms<sup>18</sup> and in many passages of the prophetic,<sup>19</sup> legalistic,<sup>20</sup> and wisdom<sup>21</sup> literature.<sup>22</sup> Both Midrash and Talmud follow a similar line of interpretation.<sup>23</sup> The possible explanation of why the Israelite judges and leaders are called *'elohim* (gods) in this psalm is that they were appointed and empowered by God to represent Him before the people. This interpretation strongly leans on the way Jesus quoted v. 6 in John 10:34–36.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Single Most Important Text in the Entire Bible: Toward a Theology of the Psalms,” in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 69.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Pss 1:5; 37:32–33; 94:21; 109:7.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Isa 1:7; 5:23, 28; 10:1–2; Jer 22:3; Amos 3:6–7; 5:7, 12; Zeph 3:3; Zech 7:9–10.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Exod 23:1, 6–7; Lev 19:15; Deut 1:7; 16:18; 24:17; 25:1–2; 27:19.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Job 5:15–16; 24:9, 14; 29:12–14; 31:16–17; 34:17–28; Prov 13:5; 14:31; 17:15; 18:5; 21:12–14; 22:23–24; 15:26; 29:7; 31:9; Eccl 5:7.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Morgenstern, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” *HUCA* 14 (1939): 31.

<sup>23</sup> See references in Trotter, 229, and Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., “‘I said: You are Gods’: Psalm 82:6 ad John 10,” *JBL* 108/4 (1989): 655–663. Some ancient translations, such as Peshitta, have the word *'elohim* (“God” or “gods”) in Exod 22:28 translated as “judges” to correspond to the occurrence of *nasi*’ (ruler) in the second part of the verse. Peshitta and its possible source *Targum Onqelos* cannot be taken as viable basis for proposing “judges” as the translation of *'elohim* in Ps 82:1, 6 because of the Targum's tendency to amend some biblical texts to avoid theological offensiveness to God, which seems to be the case also in Exod 22:28 (also, 1 Sam 28:13) (Trotter, 229). Yet these examples demonstrate that the word “judges” was a likely association for the word *'elohim* to these ancient editors, and so perhaps also to the ancient readers and hearers of the Ps 82. For more information about the rabbinic interpretation of Ps 82, see, for example, James S. Ackerman, “The Rabbinic Interpretation of Ps 82 and the Gospel of John,” *HTR* 59/2 (1966): 186–191, and Carl Mosser, “The earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *JTS* 56 (2005): 59–72.

<sup>24</sup> For an examination of the understanding and function of Ps 82:6 in John 10:34–36 see, for example, Neyrey, 647–663, and Stephen L. Homcy, “‘You are Gods’? Spirituality and a Difficult Text,” *JETS* 32/4 (1989): 485–491.

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A fourth view rests on the notion that the kings of the nations were often regarded as having divine status in ancient Near East cultures. Psalm 82 is believed to tell of Yahweh’s judgment over the kings of the surrounding nations who thought of themselves as divine. The proponents of this view contend that vv. 2–4 are more appropriately directed to human rulers acting in an unjust manner than pagan deities, because the accusations assume a continual and repeated interaction between the *'elohim* and everyday human affairs, particularly social justice. Strong emphasis is placed on the supposed parallels between Ps 82 and the Ugaritic Kirta text on the issue of gods’ moral responsibility for the maintenance of a just world. Some similarities between this view and the view that *'elohim* are Israel’s judges are seen in their common acknowledgment that the psalm’s accusations are best understood as failure in regard to human (royal or judicial) responsibilities.<sup>25</sup>

This brief overview of the major interpretations of the psalm leaves us with an impression that each interpretation of the psalm can apparently be defended. At the same time, none of the suggested interpretations is in every respect satisfactory, because they fail to acknowledge the opposite standpoint of view in order to strengthen the preferred interpretation.<sup>26</sup> However, the challenge is not necessarily the result of an exegetical misstep on the commentators’ part, but appears to be inherent to the psalm. Julian Morgenstern observes that the psalm can be hardly read in one way.<sup>27</sup> Raabe rightly points out that some scholars miss some of the ambiguity of the text, because the task of interpretation is usually to bring one final solution, forcing the interpreters to choose

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Trotter, 233–239; Bernhard Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (1922), 211, Moses Bittenwieser, *The Psalms, Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (1938; repr., New York: Ktav, 1969), 764–770, and Parker, “Beginning of the Reign of God,” 543–548 (cited in Trotter, 233).

<sup>26</sup> This is discussed later in this article in *Deliberate Poetic Ambiguity and Wordplay in Ps 82*.

<sup>27</sup> Morgenstern argues that vv. 2–4 must refer to human judges in accordance to the judicial language elsewhere in the Bible. On the other hand, he maintains that the Ugaritic texts furnished some of the background of the psalm, especially in vv. 1b and 6. He proposes radical emendation of the psalm and argues that the psalm in the present form is not an original unit but contains later insertions (vv. 2–4) for an original account of God’s punishment of the lesser gods for the sins recounted in Gen 6:1–4 (Morgenstern, 31–33). Yet certain scholars have rejected Morgenstern’s alteration of the psalm as unwarranted and unnecessary (e.g., O’Callaghan, 312; Gerald Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *ZAW* 76/1 [1964]: 30).

only one of the possibilities.<sup>28</sup> The point here is that readers are not asked to always choose one version or viewpoint. Sometimes, as it seems to be the case with Ps 82, biblical authors intentionally created ambiguity not only to demonstrate their artistic mastery but also, and perhaps more importantly, to convey the theological truth on different levels.

### Definition, Forms, and Purpose of Poetic Ambiguity

“In poetics, ambiguity represents the intentional creation of texts that can be understood in multiple ways.”<sup>29</sup> Poetic ambiguity is created by certain word combinations that, for example, include words which can be polyvalent (i.e., have multiple meanings).<sup>30</sup> By means of poetic ambiguity, biblical writers have tried to focus the hearer’s/reader’s attention on a particular passage. However, this stirring up of curiosity is never the main purpose. Poetic ambiguity points to the deeper meanings and connections between the words in a given literary context. The creation of ambiguity thus serves to enhance the central message of the text.<sup>31</sup>

Strictly speaking there are several types of ambiguity, but the distinction between them is not always clear.<sup>32</sup> For practical reasons, the

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<sup>28</sup> Raabe, 213.

<sup>29</sup> D. G. Firth, “Ambiguity,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Lexical polyvalence includes homonymy and polysemy. Homonymy is when two or more words are identical in sound (homophones) or in spelling (homographs) but have different meanings (e.g., ‘al [not] and ‘al [on] are homophones). Homonymy serves as basis for phonetic ambiguity. Phonetic ambiguity “uses a word with one meaning but which also evokes the meaning of another (nonwritten) word(s) by virtue of homophony” (Raabe, 217). For example, in Ps 96:4 the word ‘*elohim* (“gods”) which depicts the gods of other nations is homophonous with and so evocative of the word ‘*elilim* (“idols”). The latter evoked word is picked up in the first colon in v. 5. The phonetic pun conveys the message that the gods of the nations only appear to be ‘*elohim* (“gods”), but in reality are merely ‘*elilim* (“idols”). Polysemy implies that one word can have several meanings (e.g. *zamid* [I. “pruning,” II. “song”). For more information about other poetic devices involving sound (e.g., assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia), see, for example, Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2006), 222–250.

<sup>31</sup> Valerie Kabergs and Hans Ausloos, “Paronomasia or Wordplay? A Babel-Like Confusion Towards a Definition of Hebrew Wordplay,” *Biblica* 93/1 (2012): 10.

<sup>32</sup> For example, ambiguity can be lexical (when words have multiple meanings), phonetic (when a word with one meaning evokes the meaning of another word by virtue of homophony), and grammatical (e.g., when a sentence has ambiguous word order or

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differences are ignored in this article. “Poetic ambiguity,” the term used by Patrick Miller,<sup>33</sup> is preferred here because it can serve as an umbrella term for a combination of poetic devices involving ambiguity. One specific type of ambiguity, namely sustained ambiguity, however, seems to be especially relevant for the study of Ps 82. In some psalms, including likely Ps 82, ambiguity is sustained over several verses or the entire psalm. Readers begin to read the text one way, but then a later verse causes them to doubt their initial understanding of the psalm, and so engages them to reread the psalm from the beginning and to reassess its meaning.<sup>34</sup>

Poetic ambiguity creates the possibility for wordplay. Wordplay refers to the practice of some biblical authors to use sound and meaning of words to make a pun. Wordplay, like picture, conveys the message almost instantly, and makes a deeper impact on readers or hearers than ordinary speech/writing. So, for instance, the wordplay on *khasid* and *khesed* in Ps 86 portrays the close relationship between God, who is full of *khesed* (“grace”), and the psalmist, who is *khasid* (“godly”) (vv. 2, 5, 13, 15).<sup>35</sup> The literary context in which wordplay manifests itself is decisive in whether or not wordplay comes to realization. Poetic ambiguity, and so wordplay which is based on it, owe their existence to the literary context. In like manner, the full meaning of a particular literary context can only be grasped when the wordplay is comprehended.<sup>36</sup>

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unspecified subject or object). For more explanation, see, for example, Raabe, 214–227; Watson, 237–250.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 416.

<sup>34</sup> Raabe, 224. Psalm 7:11–16 is a good example of sustained ambiguity. “God [is] a just judge, And God is angry [with the wicked] every day” (v. 11). The subject of v. 11 is God. Verses 12–16 have “he” as their subject. At first, the reader assumes that God is the subject of all verbs in vv. 12–16 in light of v. 11, but then realizes that vv. 14–16 could not speak about God but His enemies. The reader thus has to retrace his steps and find where the shift from “he” being “God” to being “enemies” occurred (Raabe, 224–225). Notice that some English Bible versions supply certain words in v. 14, which are not found in the Hebrew text (e.g., “the wicked,” NKJV; “whoever,” NIV; “the wicked man,” ESV, RSV), in order to help readers avoid possible confusion.

<sup>35</sup> For other definitions, forms, and examples of wordplays in biblical Hebrew literature, see, for example, Watson, 237–250.

<sup>36</sup> Kabergs and Ausloos, 11.

In the following section, I will attempt to demonstrate deliberate ambiguity and wordplay in Ps 82, and try to elucidate the psalm's message in the light of its possible ambiguity.

### Deliberate Poetic Ambiguity and Wordplay in Ps 82

Poetic ambiguity in Ps 82 is reinforced by repetition of certain words of multiple meanings.<sup>37</sup> The key repeated words in the psalm are *'elohim* ("God," "gods") (vv. 1 [2x], 6, 8), *shapat* ("judge," "rule," "deliver") (vv. 1, 2, 3, 8), and *'erets* ("earth," "humankind") (vv. 5, 8). I will attempt to show how the repetition of these words, particularly of *'elohim*, and their different meanings create ambiguity in the psalm.

The psalmist has created a slight confusion by using the same term *'elohim* to depict both the God of Israel and those who are inferior to him (vv. 1, 6 & 8). Although the word *'elohim* appears numerous times in the Psalms to depict both the God of Israel and those who are inferior to Him, Ps 82 is the only psalm in which uncertainty about the meaning of this word occurs (perhaps also Ps 138:1). In the Psalms when it does not depict the God of Israel, *'elohim* most often refers to the gods of the nations (e.g., Pss 95:3; 96:4; 97:7, 9; 135:5). This notion may cause readers to assume that the word has this meaning also in Ps 82, and so understand the trial scene in v. 1 as the psalmist's poetic way to proclaim the sovereignty of the God of Israel, similar to other psalms (e.g., Pss 89:10; 92:8-11; 93:3-4; 104:5-13).<sup>38</sup> Verse 1 seems thus to portray God presiding over the council of supernatural (real or believed to be so) beings.

The Hebrew phrase *nitsab ba'adat 'el* ("stands in the congregation of the gods") is rendered by some as "presiding over the council of gods" in support of the view that the God of Israel is the presiding chief deity of the pantheon of gods. However, the rendering of *natsab*, which simply means "stands," as "presides" is highly interpretative. Some authors

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<sup>37</sup> Lowell K. Handy demonstrates that the psalmist utilized not only repetition of words with multiple meanings but also repetition of sound patterns to indicate emphasis in the poem and unite the poem as a whole (Lowell K. Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *JSOT* 47 [1990]: 51-66).

<sup>38</sup> As discussed earlier, Israelite poetry did not flourish in a cultural vacuum, but offered a culturally recognizable and enjoyable framework to its unique theological message. Yet the pagan imagery is polemically redefined, namely it is not given the meaning and significance that it is ascribed in ancient Near Eastern literature, to command the enduring majesty of God.

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argue that God’s position as “standing” (*natsab*) indicates that God *stands* to pronounce the verdict against the accused. If God was imagined as presiding over the divine assembly, He would be portrayed as sitting.<sup>39</sup> God “stands” or “rises” to pronounce the sentence after the legal proceedings are over (Pss 12:5; 76:8–9). That is why in the Psalms God is frequently called upon to “arise,” namely to act and execute the judgment (e.g., Pss 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 44:23, 26).<sup>40</sup> The verb *natsab* parallels the verb *qum* (“arise”) in v. 8, which is indicative of divine judgment.

In addition, the judicial sentence proclaimed against the “gods” in vv. 2–4 clearly reflects God’s expectations of justice from the Israelite judges and the people (Deut 1:16, 17; 16:18–20; Ps 72:1–7; 12–14). The question arises: If the psalmist had in mind a mock trial of the pagan gods, why did he make strong allusions to the Torah in vv. 2–4? Pagan gods were not given the task of upholding the Torah, and so could hardly be judged for not fulfilling it. Likewise, the foreign divine kings and oppressors are not likely represented in vv. 2–4. In addition, if the “gods” (v. 1) here are the divine kings of foreign nations, would not the pagan tyrant oppress the entire company of Israel and not merely only “the poor and the fatherless” and “the afflicted and the needy” (vv. 3–4)? The psalmist clearly does not speak of the oppressed as the whole nation of Israel (like in Pss 74, 79, 80), but rather as the weak and underprivileged individuals within Israel.<sup>41</sup> The divine judgment thus

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<sup>39</sup> Trotter, 225–228. Various occurrences in the Scripture demonstrate that a judge in Israel was normally seated (Exod 18:13; Judg 4:5; 1 Kgs 7:7; Ruth 4:2; Isa 16:5; 28:6; Ps 122:5). God, in contrast, is often depicted as standing when He judges (Pss 7:6; 9:19; 12:5; 76:9; Isa 3:13). Whereas it is the usual posture of God, in conception or vision, to be seated as He is surrounded by His servants (1 Kgs 22:19–22; Isa 6; Ezek 1:26), standing is a sign of an extraordinary event (Matitiah Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly: An Interpretation of Psalm 82,” *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–1970): 127). “Standing up” or “rising” in Hebrew expresses imminent action (e.g., Gen 13:17; 19:15; 27:43; 31:13; Num 10:35; Deut 10:11; Pss 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 12:5; 17:13; 35:2; 44:36; 68:1; 74:22; 76:9; 102:13; Jer 2:27–28; Ezek 3:22).

<sup>40</sup> Sarna, 170.

<sup>41</sup> In addition, there is no biblical evidence that the Israelite kings or the other nations’ kings were considered as divine by the Israelites and the biblical writers. The Israelite kings were instructed to regard themselves as equal to their people and accountable to God (Deut 17:18–20; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:30–32). The notion that Ps 82 concerns the foreign divine kings and not the Israelite judges and leaders renders the message of the psalm irrelevant for the Israelite worshipers, except that it uplifts the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Yet the psalm gives specific and detailed description of the injustices and faults of the accused in vv. 2–4

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seems to involve the leaders and the people of Israel, causing readers to reassess v. 1, and possibly interpret it as picturing an assembly of Israel.

Verse 6 seems to support the notion that the “gods” are leaders of Israel, because it calls the “gods” “the children of the Most High,” a privilege to which the people who worship the God Most High may be entitled (Gen 14:19; Pss 91:1; 92:1).<sup>42</sup> Yet a serious difficulty is encountered in v. 7, where the “gods” are sentenced to die “like men” (*ke’adam*). The word *’adam* denotes human beings (Gen 1:26–27; 3:22; Pss 11:4; 12:1; 90:3). A question poses itself: Why does the psalmist stress that the condemned will die “like men,” if they are human beings? Clearly if they are going to die like mortals, they are not mortals.<sup>43</sup> This difficulty may cause readers to reassess the meaning of the psalm, and reconsider the notions of pagan gods. Yet, although v. 7 seems compatible with the view that the “gods” are pagan gods who are stripped of their immortality, the notion that God ever called the pagan gods His children (v. 6) is incongruous with the psalms’ often proclaimed loathing of idols (Pss 96:5; 97:7; 115:5–7).

On the other hand, angels are called “the sons of God” (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps 29:1), and so seem to better fit the psalm’s context than the pagan gods. Certain biblical texts tell about the involvement of angels in human affairs. For example, as God’s messengers, angels deliver God’s word to people (e.g., Num 22:31–35). Angels are also given the task of protecting the righteous (e.g., Ps 91:11–12). However, angels are never

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that can be hardly considered as the proclamation of judgment over the foreign kings. In other biblical texts, accusations similar to those found in vv. 2–4 describe the failures of the Israelite leaders and the people, and not of the foreign kings (e.g., Pss 50:7, 16–20; 89:30–32; Isa 1:23; 3:13–15; 10:1–2; Jer 5:28, 31; 7:5–6; 22:2–3; Ezek 22:6–7).

<sup>42</sup> God frequently refers to the people of Israel as His children, and to Himself as their Father (Ps 89:26; Isa 49:15; Jer 3:19; 31:20; Hos 11:1; Mal 1:6). In Ps 2, the Lord regards Israel’s king as His son (*beni*) (vv. 7, 12). “The sons of Zion” (*bene tsiyyon*) represent the people of God (Ps 149:2). In this psalm thus, judges are possibly compared to “gods” (*’elohim*) because they are given sovereignty over other fellow human beings in maintaining justice in society (Exod 21:6; 22:8, 9; 2 Chr 19:6–11). In the New Testament, Jesus applies the words “you are gods” (quoting Ps 82:6) to those “to whom the word of God came,” that is, the prophets and kings of Israel (John 10:34, 35).

<sup>43</sup> The NIV has “like *mere* mortals” (v. 7). This translation seems to be interpretative to fit the notion that the “gods” are human judges who are condemned by God to die as “mere” or “ordinary” mortals. This rendering is not without problems. For example, does this mean that judges would otherwise experience a kind of death that is different from ordinary people’s death?

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invested with judiciary power, and so could hardly be represented in vv. 2–4.<sup>44</sup>

The other two key words in the psalm are also repeated with their variant meanings. The word *shapat* is used differently in the psalm: it probably means “judge” in vv. 1 and 2, “deliver” or “defend” in v. 3, and “rule” or “govern” in v. 8. The word *'erets* depicts the physical earth in v. 5. In v. 8 *'erets* parallels *kol haggoyim* (“all nations”), and depicts all humanity. The exact meaning of the repeated polyvalent words often remains ambiguous until the remainder of the psalm elucidates their connotation.

This short overview of the psalm seems to demonstrate that the poetic ambiguity of Ps 82 is engaging and challenging. Readers thus begin to read the psalm one way, but then a later verse causes them to reexamine their initial understanding of the psalm. In fact, sustained ambiguity in the psalm may cause readers to reread and reassess the psalm several times by the time they finish reading the poem. Elmer B. Smick points out that “[c]uriously the Psalm seems to move in both directions,”<sup>45</sup> namely it depicts God’s judgment over both deities and human judges.<sup>46</sup> Von Herbert Niehr argues that the interpretation of Ps 82 has to involve arguments which are brought forward for both

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<sup>44</sup> T. Longman argues that “God rebukes the angels (gods) for not upholding justice for the vulnerable (*the weak, fatherless, poor, oppressed, needy*) who are without aid and have no resources to combat those who want to take advantage of them (*the wicked*)” (Longman, 306). Yet nowhere in the Scripture do we see that God assigned such work to angels. The weakness of this argument lies also in the fact that angels are judged for their supposed failure to protect the weak from the wicked, while the wicked, who are the main source of injustice and suffering, are not judged in this psalm.

<sup>45</sup> Smick, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Yet Smick favors the interpretation of the “gods” as human judges (Smick, 95–97). However, his explanation of v. 7 is not satisfactory. Smick acknowledges that if the “gods” are going to die like mortals, then they are not mortals. However, he then attempts to deny this reasoning by pointing to the Old Testament prohibition of imputing personality to false gods and John 10, which sees the “gods” as humans. In addition, he points to the psalm’s inclusio (vv. 1 and 8), and concludes that v. 1 speaks about earth (and not about heaven) because v. 8 speaks about God’s triumph on earth (Smick, 95). This interpretation does not explain the aforementioned reasoning that if the “gods” are going to die like mortals, then they are not mortals (v. 7). Smick attempts to explain why this reasoning cannot be sustained in the light of other biblical texts, but does not show why it cannot be sustained by the psalm’s context. Actually he offers no interpretation of v. 7.

interpretations. He argues that choosing between deities and humans as “gods” in vv. 1b and 6 is a wrong alternative.<sup>47</sup>

Ambiguity appears to be deliberate and the creative part of the general outlook of the psalm. If the psalmist lacked other words for pagan gods, angels, judges, kings, or whatever was intended by *'elohim* in vv. 1b and 6, then we might maintain that the psalmist had to risk misunderstanding on the part of his hearers and readers. However, because there are other words to depict them, which are more common and accurate than *'elohim* or *'adat 'el* which are used in this psalm,<sup>48</sup> it is highly possible that the psalmist deliberately created ambiguity to engage readers to reread the poem and search for its meaning, and as they do this they recognize the truth of the various proposals in the psalm and their rich application in different life situations. In other words, the effect of poetic ambiguity is that, upon reflection, readers realize that various options are possible and theologically true. These effects would be lost if the ambiguity was resolved by preferring only one interpretation. In most

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<sup>47</sup> Von Herbert Niehr, “Götter oder Menschen – eine falsche Alternative Bemerkungen zu Ps 82,” *ZAW* 99/1 (1987): 95. Niehr seeks to incorporate the arguments of both alternatives, and interprets the “gods” as the Canaanite officials who practiced social injustice. He argues that the polytheistic pantheon was understood to be in analogy to the world, namely the actions of the officials corresponded to the actions of gods which they honored. God’s judgement of the Canaanite officials is thus also judgement of their gods (Ibid., 94–98). This proposal has advantage of recognizing that more than one group of addressees is meant in the psalm. However, Niehr’s “middle course” in the interpretation of Ps 82 seems to undermine the full theological potential of the psalm’s deliberate poetic ambiguity by limiting the psalm to one alternative.

<sup>48</sup> In numerous other biblical texts, the word *'elohim* is often accompanied by some other words when it depicts the pagan gods. The following are some of the frequent phrases: *'elohim 'acherim* (“other gods”) (2 Kgs 17:35–38; 22: 17; 2 Chr 7:19), *'elohe haggoyim/ha'ammim* (“the gods of the nations”) (2 Kgs 18:33; 19:12; 1 Chr 16:26; Ps 96:5), *'elohe ha'amme ha'arets* (the gods of the peoples of the land) (1 Chr 5:25), *'elohe hannekar* (“the foreign gods”) (Judg 10:16; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chr 33:15), *'elil* (“idol”) (1 Chr 16:26; Ps 96:5). In Ps 97:7 *'elohim* is described as *pesel* (“graven image”) and *'elil* (“idol”). In Isa 21:9 *'elohim* is accompanied by *kesil* (“graven image”). These words help the reader immediately recognize that *'elohim* is meant to depict the pagan gods, and not the God of Israel. However, these and other descriptive words are absent from Ps 82. Several Hebrew words depict human authorities, like judges, kings, and princes. Some of these words are: *shopet* (“judge”) (1 Chr 17:10; 2 Chr 1:2; Pss 2:10; 141:6; 148:11), *sar* (“prince”) (Pss 68:27; 105:22; 119:23; 148:11), *melek* (“king”) (Pss 2:10; 68:29; 72:11; 76:12; 148:11), *nadib* (“noble one”) (Pss 47:9; 83:11; 107:40; 113:8; 118:9), *nagid* (“prince”) (Ps 76:12), *nasik* (“prince”) (Ps 83:11). The common words to depict angels or heavenly beings are: *mal'ak* (“angel”) (Pss 78:49; 91:11; 103:20; 104:4; 148:2), and *tsaba'* (“host”) (Ps 103:21; 148:2).

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psalms when the word *'elohim* denotes the gods of other nations, the psalmists prefer to use some other words to depict the God of Israel (e.g., *yhwh* [the LORD], *'adonay* [the Lord]), probably to avoid close association of God with idols or misapprehension on the part of readers and hearers (Pss 86:8; 95:3; 96:4–5; 97:9; 135:8), but not in this psalm.<sup>49</sup> Ambiguity allows the poet to play with words.<sup>50</sup> The psalm thus engages the word *'elohim* (“God,” “gods”) in an intriguing word play to emphasize God’s judgment against the corrupt “gods.” Wordplay is based on a kind of polysemy, namely the word *'elohim* is repeated with various modifications. Certain real or imagined authorities are perceived as *'elohim* (“gods”) by people, because they represent the *'elohim* (“God”), the supreme Judge, and administer justice on earth (vv. 2–4). However, because these *'elohim* (“gods”) show no justice, no likeness or correspondence exists between them and the *'elohim* (“God”) who loves justice (Deut 10:18; Pss 10:14; 68:5), and thus they cease to be considered as *'elohim* (“gods”) (vv. 6–7). The psalmist aims to reach with this message not only the fellow Israelite believers by appealing to the Torah in vv. 2–4, but also all nations (v. 8).

Wordplays have different functions. One of the functions, which seems to be relevant here, is to show that appearance can be deceptive.<sup>51</sup> The psalmist highlights the deceptive character of the “gods” by

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<sup>49</sup> However, Ps 82 is not the only psalm that uses the word *'elohim* to depict both the God of Israel and the gods of other nations in the same literary context. A similar example is found in Ps 136:2. However, the phrase *'elohe ha 'elohim* (“the God of gods”) in Ps 136:2, which is Hebrew superlative meaning “the greatest God,” does not have as great significance for the interpretation of Ps 136 as the understanding of *'elohim* has for the interpretation of Ps 82.

<sup>50</sup> Kabergs and Ausloos rightly maintain that the term “wordplay” must not be understood as some kind of “play” with no “serious” function. Wordplay is sometimes wrongly associated by some authors with exclusively comic scenes. As seen in classical times, wordplay was not only present in comedy, but also constitutive of the genre of tragedy. The “play” with different aspects of words often betrays serious purposes, far more frequently than it does humorous ones (Kabergs and Ausloos, 9, 11).

<sup>51</sup> A good example is Ps 5:9 with its contrast between the deviousness of the psalmist’s enemies and their smooth speech (“For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their *inward part* [*qereb*] is destruction; their throat is an *open tomb* [*qeber*]; they flatter with their tongue”) (emphasis supplied). Some other functions of wordplay are: 1) to amuse and sustain interest (especially puns on proper names); 2) to assist composition; 3) to lend authenticity to the poet, because wordplay was evidence of a poet’s mastery of language; 4) to equate two disparate things by playing on the similarity of their names; and 5) to denote reversal of fortune (Watson, 245–246).

depicting them with the same word that is used to represent the living God of Israel (*'elohim*). The deceitfulness of the “gods” is so great that they appear to be equal to God, but in reality they are completely opposite of Him in both nature (the “gods” are mortal, and God is immortal) and character (the “gods” are unjust, and God is just). The wordplay on *'elohim* gives also a humorous twist to the “gods,” who were considered exalted but were brought low by the only true *'elohim*. In this psalm, poetic ambiguity is creative and deliberate, and so it has to be acknowledged as a constitutive part of the psalm’s message. Seeking to resolve the psalm’s ambiguity can be damaging, because poetic ambiguity serves to impress an important theological message upon readers. This brings us to the next question in our study, namely a possible theological reason for the ambiguity.

#### **A Theological Reason for Ambiguity**

Given ambiguous connotation and the negative context, the word *'elohim* (“gods”) in vv. 1b and 6 may represent everything that pretends to take God’s place and competes for people’s devotion with God, who is the sovereign Judge and Sustainer of the world. The psalmist achieves to express multiple meanings in a terse style, which is typical of Hebrew poetry, by creating poetic ambiguity. Poetic ambiguity in the psalm highlights an important theological point that there are only two sides in the judgment: 1) God, who is the Judge, and 2) every human and other perceived powers. There is irony in the psalmist’s use of the same word, *'elohim*, to depict both the unique and supreme God and those who only pretend to be or are falsely perceived as sovereign but are not.

Poetic ambiguity gives a special appeal to the psalm and points to its great potential. The ambiguous moments in the psalm are likely meant to engage the reader to search deeply for the intended meaning and provoke him to think of the various possible “gods” in his world that are or will be put on trial by the sovereign God. Hopefully the reader will be driven to identify his “gods,” namely people, institutions, or things that he relies on for life and security more than on the living God, and let God judge his idolatry as well. In this way the psalm demonstrates its potential to put a great number of subjects on the trial and proclaim all the possible “gods” unrighteous and impotent to secure the world. Poetic ambiguity thus permits the psalm to convey multivalent theological possibilities, because it is “a tool that writers use to involve readers in the process of

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creating meaning because of the need to continually reread and recontextualize a text.”<sup>52</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus quotes v. 6 to prove that he is not breaking the law of God when he speaks of his unity with his Father (John 10:30–36). Jesus claims that if the Scripture was not in error calling the mortals “gods,” than neither is there error in calling the one whom God consecrated “the son of God” (vv. 35–36).<sup>53</sup> The very ambiguity of *'elohim* allows Jesus to make the argument he does in John 10. In Ps 82 *'elohim* is given a negative connotation, because *'elohim* misrepresent God before the people and abuse their God-given privileges. This means that *'elohim* can have a positive connotation in a different context, namely if *'elohim* are devoted to God and His calling, like Jesus is. In his argument Jesus does not refer to the negative inference of *'elohim* in Ps 82, but simply points to the fact that even mortals are called *'elohim* in the Scripture and so proves that his accusers' claim in v. 33 is without effect.

Although it involves deliberate ambiguity, the psalm is by no means vague. The psalm's theological boundaries are clearly defined. The psalm is framed between the repeated proclamations of God's dominion as just Judge (vv. 1, 8). Another significant recurring word in the psalm is *kol* (“all”) (vv. 5, 6, 8). This word highlights the totality of depravity of the world: “all the foundations of the earth” are falling apart (v. 5), and “all of you” have fallen short of God's righteousness (v. 6). The word *kol* highlights also another key theological point in the psalm: the totality of God's rule as the answer for the world's total depravity (v. 8). These theological truths are given special attention in the rest of the Scripture (e.g., Pss 96:13; 98:9; Isa 11:4; 53:6; Rom 3:23). The psalm methodically leads towards one possible conclusion: God is the supreme and only Judge (v. 8), because all “gods” are unrighteous and unreliable. The proclamation of God's sovereignty is a matter of survival of the world, because only God can stop and undo the destructive effects of injustice and provide stability and security to the world.

Although written many centuries ago, the psalm's assessment of reality is strikingly contemporary. The mastery of the psalm to bring on trial every possible “god” is an answer to the sinful humanity's propensity to design and follow myriads of “gods” (1 Kgs 11:33; 2 Kgs

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<sup>52</sup> Firth, 11.

<sup>53</sup> See Neyrey, 655–663, Homcy, 485–491, and Ackerman, 186–191.

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21:3; Isa 49:7–13; Rom 1:23, 25; 1 Cor 8:5). The ambiguity of who or what the “gods” in vv. 1b and 6 represent gives the psalm a timeless quality that has enabled God’s people in all generations to proclaim God’s sovereignty over every power that rises itself to usurp God’s place or is disloyal to His requirements.

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