

Notes on the Morphology and Meaning of “elohim” And its various forms

Question: Does *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) always mean “gods” since it is constructed as a plural noun (i.e., is it always plural in meaning)?

Answer: No

Clear examples of *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) as singular

Genesis 1:1
בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:¹
In the beginning, **God** created the heavens and the earth.

Exodus 7:1
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאֵה נִתְּתִיךָ אֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן
אֶחָיֶךָ יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָךְ:

The LORD replied to Moses, “See, I have made you (as) **God** to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.

See the partial entry for elohim below from *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, by LUDWIG KOEHLER AND WALTER BAUMGARTNER – this is the leading lexicon for biblical Hebrew (4 vols. Or available electronically through Logos Bible Software):

B. אֱלֹהִים (2250 ×); plene Ps 18⁴⁷ 143¹⁰ 145¹ †; Sec. ελωειμ (Brønno 168f):
אֱלֹהִי, 2K 17³¹ Q, אֱלֹהֵי/הֵי, אֱלֹהֵימוֹ (BL 257p) אֱלֹהֵי, Sec. ελωαῖ Dt 32³⁷,
with prefix אֱלֹהִים/בָּא/וְאֱלֹהִים (BL 222b): but מֵאָּ Ps 86 (→ מִן): —1. **gods**
כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי מְצָרִים Ex 12¹² הָאֵל the gods 18¹¹ Ps 86⁸, gods and men Ju 9^{9,13}, gods Ex
32^{1,23} 34^{15,15} Dt 32³⁹ Jos 24¹⁵ Hos 13⁴ Ps 82¹ Da 11³⁷, אֱלֹהֵי הָאֵל the God of gods
(→ V אֵל C 4c) Dt 10¹⁷ Ps 136², אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (64 ×: → אֲחֵר), בְּנֵי (הָ)אֵל Gn 6²
sons of gods (Sept., Rabb. angels; alt. sons of God; individual gods, Koehler *Theol.*
3f, but unlikely Gn 6^{2,4} and impossible with → בְּנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן, cf. → בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים → V אֵל
C 1b) Jb 16²¹, 38⁷ †; Ringgren 58ff; אֱלֹהֵי תְּאֵמָרִי the gods of the Amorites Jos

24¹⁵, אֱלֹהֵי אֲדוֹם 'א the gods of Edom 2C 25²⁰; אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים 'א other gods (than Y.) Ex 20³
(→ אֲחֵר 3); —2. אֱלֹהִים becomes singular (Brockelmann *Heb. Syn.* §19b, c)

Here is part of the article on *elohim* from the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Brill):

GOD (I) אֱלֹהִים

I. The usual word for ‘god’ in the Hebrew Bible is *l hîm*, a plural formation of *l ah*, the latter being an expanded form of the Common Semitic noun *il* (→Eloah). The term *l hîm* occurs some 2570 times in the Hebrew Bible, with a variety of meanings. In such expressions as “all the gods of Egypt” (Exod 12:12) it refers to a plurality [Page 353] of deities—without there being a clear distinction between these gods and their →images. Far more frequent is the use of the plural with reference to a single being: →Chemosh is the *l hîm* of Moab (1 Kgs 11:33); the plural here is a plural of excellence or of majesty (Joüon/Muraoka § 136*d*). Though having the generic sense of ‘god’, the term is also used in an absolute sense (‘the god’, e.g. Gen 5:22) whence it developed the function of a proper name (‘God’): when an Israelite suppliant says his soul thirsts for *l hîm* he is not referring to just any god but to →Yahweh the god of Israel (Ps 42:3).¹

Typically West-Semitic, though not exclusively so, is the use of the divine plural where a single entity is concerned. In texts that use the alphabetic script such plurals of excellence are not readily recognizable. Where the Akkadian writing system is used, combining a syllabic script with various logograms, plural forms are less ambiguous. A good illustration of the plural of divinity is found in the Amarna letters, where the Pharaoh is repeatedly addressed by his Canaanite vassals as DINGIR.MEŠ-*ia*, literally ‘my gods’, but plainly referring to one person only (JIRKU 1938; cf. N. NA AMAN, DINGIR^{mes} in the Amarna Letters, *UF* 22 [1990] 255).²

Question: Can *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) have a plural meaning?

Answer: Yes - When grammar and context dictate that is the case.

The classic example:

¹Toorn, K. van der, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*. 2nd extensively rev. ed. Leiden; Boston; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999.

²Ibid.

אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֹת־אֵל בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט
 God (singular) stands (*singular verb*) in the divine assembly;
 in the midst of the gods (plural) he passes judgment.

More specifically, the meaning of any occurrence of *elohim* must be discerned in three ways:

- A. Grammatical indications elsewhere in the text that help to determine if a singular or plural meaning is meant.
- B. Grammatical rules in Hebrew that are true in the language as a whole.
- C. Historical / Logical context.

To illustrate, consider words in English such as:

"deer", "sheep", "fish" - the point is *you need other words to help you tell if one or more than one of these animals is meant*. Sometimes these other words are verbs that help you tell. Compare the two examples::

- 1) "The sheep is lost" - the word "is" is a singular verb (It goes with a singular subject; one wouldn't say, for example, "I are lost" - you would use a verb that goes with the singular subject ("I am lost").
- 2) "The sheep are lost" - the word "are" is a plural verb (again, another word next to our noun "sheep" tells us in this case that plural sheep are meant.

All of this is just basic grammar - and every language has grammar. Biblical Hebrew has its own ways of telling us if *elohim* means ONE person or many gods. It matches the noun *elohim* to singular or plural verbs, or with singular or plural pronouns (to use "sheep" again as an example: "Those sheep are white"). The word "those" is what's called a demonstrative pronoun - it automatically tells us that sheep in this sentence is meant to be understood as a **plural**.

Question: Isn't it true that the Bible teaches humanity was created by gods (plural), not one God? Isn't it true that *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) is a plural in Genesis 1:26-27?

Answer: No – Genesis 1:26-27 is explicitly clear on two points: (1) God is announcing his decision to create humanity to a group [divine council, not the Trinity]; (2) when the creation takes place, only the singular God is doing the act of creating.

Genesis 1:26

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הַרֹמֵשׁ הָרֶמֶשׂ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

And **God** said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

Illustration of the “plural of exhortation” –

“let’s go for a drive” – one person utters the statement to a group, then

Genesis 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר
וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And **God** created man in His image, in the image of **God** He created him; male and female **He** created them.

Three times we have a singular verb (create; in red; Hebrew bara’). In verse 26 when we read “let US make mankind in OUR image,” if GOD were speaking [as though referring to himself as a plurality or to a group of the elohim, as though that’s what the word meant], we’d see PLURAL verbs here in v. 27, but we don’t.

Question: What about the slightly different *ha-elohim* (הַאֱלֹהִים) – isn't it true that form is always plural and speaks of "gods"?

Answer: No – this word (it's the same noun plus the definite article) works the same way as *elohim* without the article – grammar and context will tell you what the meaning is.

ha-elohim (הַאֱלֹהִים) with plural meaning:

Genesis 35:7

וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא לַמָּקוֹם אֵל בֵּית-אֵל כִּי שָׁם נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו
הַאֱלֹהִים בְּבָרְתוֹ מִפְּנֵי אָחִיו:

There he [Jacob] built an altar and named the site El-bethel, for it was there that **the gods** appeared to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

ha-elohim (הַאֱלֹהִים) with singular meaning:

Deuteronomy 4:35

אַתָּה הָרֵאתָ לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עִוד מַלְבָּדָיו:

You have been shown [lit., 'you have been made to know'] that **YHWH, he** is **God**; there is none beside **him**.

Question: Isn't it true that the singular form *eloah* (אֱלֹהַ) is actually feminine in gender, and so this points to a goddess in Israel's worship?

Answer: No – this comes purely from not knowing the language. The question is apparently based on the assumption that since the word ends in "h" (the typical feminine absolute ending), this is the case. This ignores the fact that words in Hebrew that are masculine can end in "h", and misses the fact that the form is not vocalized as a feminine.

Job 4:9

מִנְשֵׁמַת אֱלֹהִים יִאָּבְדוּ וּמִרוּחַ אִפּוֹ יִכָּלּוּ:

They perish by a blast from **God**; they are gone at the breath of **His** nostrils.