Elohim and the Royal We

by Nehemia Gordon

The majestic plural Elohim gets the singular verb and adjective some 2000 times throughout the Tanach. However, in the book of Genesis we find *three* passages in which God speaks in the first person plural as "we", "our", and "us". The first such passage deals with the creation of mankind, in which God declares,

> Let **us** make man in **our** image after **our** likeness that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the animals and over the whole earth and over all the creeping things that creep on the earth. (Genesis 1:26)

Who is this "us" and "our"? Does God have multiple personalities? Is there more than one god?

Immediately before the words "Let **us** make man in **our** image" we read *vayomer elohim* וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים "And **(he)** Elohim said". The verb *vayomer* וַיֹּאמֶר meaning "and he said" is singular and this proves that the speaker is a **singular** individual. Were Elohim a plurality the verse would have opened *vayomru elohim* וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהִים with the plural verb *vayomru* וַיֹּאמְרוּ indicating "And (they) Elohim said". The phrase "Elohim said/ spoke" appears about forty-four times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in every single instance it is "(he) God said/ spoke" with the singular verb and never "(they) God said/ spoke" with the plural verb. Additionally, the phrase "YHWH said/ spoke" appears another 781 times and it is also always "he said/ he spoke" with the singular verb.

The word *na'aseh* נַעֲשֶׂה means "let **us** make [man]" and the *na-* נַ prefix indicates "us". From the "**us**" prefix we might think that mankind was created by multiple creators. Similarly, the words *betsalmenu kidmutenu* בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ "in **our** image after **our** likeness" have the suffix *-nu* נוּ at the end of each word indicating "our". We might think that "our" image and "our" likeness refers to multiple individuals with similar characteristics with which mankind was to be endowed. Yet when the creation of mankind actually takes place, in the very next verse, it says, "And **(he)** Elohim created (*vayivra* וַיִּבְרָא) man in **His** image (*betsalmo* בְּצַלְמוֹ), in the image of Elohim **He** created

(*bara* בָּרָא) him" (Genesis 1:27). So man was not created by the multiple "we" but by the single individual Elohim who is termed "He". Nor was man created in the image of a group of multiple individuals but only in the single image of Elohim which is described as "His image", that is, the **single** image of YHWH. Were Elohim a multiplicity the verse would have read, "And **(they)** Elohim created (*vayivre'u* וַיִּבְרְאוּ) man in **their** image (*betsalmam* בְּצַלְמָם), in the image of Elohim **they** created (*bar'u* בְּרְאוּ) him". Since this is not what Scripture says we must conclude once again that Elohim is a **singular** individual.

The next instance in which God speaks in the 1st person plural as "we/ us" is in the Garden of Eden Account. After Adam eats of the forbidden fruit, God declares, "Behold the man has become as one of **us**, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). Despite this reference to "us" we again find that God is a singular individual. The very same verse opens, "And **(he)** YHWH Elohim said". Were YHWH Elohim a plurality the verse would have read, "And **(they)** YHWH Elohim said". Furthermore, after God explains the concern that the undeserving Adam may eat from the Tree of Life we read, "And **(he)** YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". It is the single individual YHWH Elohim who banishes Adam from the garden, not the plural "we".

The third instance of the divine "we" appears in the Towel of Babel Account. After observing that mankind is in a state of rebellion, God declares, "Let **us** go down and let **us** mix up their language there" (Genesis 11:7). The very same speech opens, "And **(he)** YHWH said" (Genesis 11:6) which indicates that we are dealing with a single individual YHWH. When God actually descends to mix up the languages we read, "And **(he)** YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". In this passage as well, YHWH is referred to as a singular individual ("He said", "He scattered").

The Royal We

If YHWH Elohim is a single individual, why does He say "we", "our", and "us"? How can any singular speaker refer to himself as "we"? Many languages have a linguistic phenomenon in which a speaker refers to himself in the plural known as the "royal we". This is generally considered a sign of self-magnification, similar to the *majestic plural* used to magnify nouns. The best-known example of this is the British royal family. The

19th century English Queen Victoria used to express her dissatisfaction by declaring, "We are not amused" rather than the expected, "I am not amused".[1] In modern English the *royal we* is used in a variety of contexts not necessarily related to royalty. For example, in certain types of formal speaking and writing, "we" can be used "by a speaker or writer, in order to secure an impersonal tone, or to avoid the obtrusive repetition of 'I'".[2] Modern English also has the "modest we" in which "a person uses a plural form in order not to call attention to himself as an individual."[3] In some dialects of American English "we" is used in place of "I" as a colloquialism, without any connotation of formality or self-magnification. For example, "Give **us** a chance!" in certain dialects of American English has the meaning of "Give **me** a chance!".[4] Thus the *royal we* in English is not strictly speaking "royal" as it is used in a number of social contexts.

In ancient times, the *royal we* was not strictly speaking "royal" either. Instead it was used as a formal mode of address in the context of a "royal court". An ancient king would be surrounded by a host of advisors, ministers, and attendants known as the "royal court" or "royal council". Daniel, standing in the Babylonian *royal court*, said to king Nebuchadnezzar, "This dream and its interpretation **we** shall say in the king's presence " (Dan 2:36 [Aramaic]). The singular individual Daniel refers to himself as "we" because this is the formal mode of address used in the royal court.

Job's companion, Bildad the Shuchite complains to Job, "Why have **we** been considered as an animal, as stupid (pl) in your eyes" (Job 18:3). When Bildad says "we" he is not referring to himself and his two companions. Were this the case he would have said, "Why have **we** been considered as **animals**". The fact that Bildad complains that he has been considered "an animal" in the singular proves he is only talking about himself. While Bildad is not in a royal court he uses the *royal we* because he is partaking in a

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[1] It should be emphasized that we are talking about the first person plural "we", "us", "our". This should not be confused with referring to oneself in the third person singular, which would be the queen saying of herself, "The queen is not amused". In Biblical Hebrew people commonly refer to themselves in the third person without any implication of magnification. For example, Bil'am opens his own vision, "Thus says Bil'am the son of Be'or, thus says the open-eyed man" (Nu 24:3).

[2] See the entry "we" in the *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition*, Prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, Vol. XX p. 33

[3] See the entry "we" in *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, B. Evans and C. Evans, Random House, New York 1957, p. 549

[4] See under "we" in *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide*, New York and Oxford 1999, p. 1146

royal court-like audience. Before being tested by God, Job had been a local nobleman with great wealth (Job 1:3). After losing everything, Job sat on the floor surrounded by his companions who came to comfort him and give him advice (Job 2:11-13). Job's companions proceed to give long flowery speeches full of advice in the manner that courtiers might address a king in the royal court. As a result, they occasionally resort to the use of the *royal we*. In both of the above examples the speaker is addressing a royal court or similar forum. In this context, the *royal we* is employed as a formal mode of address, somewhat like the "we" used in certain types of formal English oratory and writing (see above). It is worth noting that the *royal we* was used in an erratic fashion in biblical times. Thus when Daniel addresses the royal court on a different occasion he speaks as "I" (e.g. Dan 5:7). This is rather like the queen of England who now only refers to herself as "we" on rare occasions.[5]

Another example of the *royal we* can be found in the words of Ahab king of Israel. Ahab had been planning an invasion of Aram and assembled 400 prophets to tell him how victorious he would be. Sitting on his royal throne before his assembly of courtiers Ahab asked the 400 prophets, "Shall **we** go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall **I** hold back" (2Chr 18:5). When speaking in the royal court the king freely switches off between the *royal we* and the regular "I"! The 400 prophets respond to Ahab as a singular king, "Go up (singular) and God will deliver [the enemy] into the hand of the king" (2Chr 18:5). Despite Ahab's use of the *royal we*, he is **not** mysteriously transformed into a multiplicity of personalities and his four hundred false prophets accordingly speak to him as a single individual king.

The Heavenly Council

If the ancients used the *royal we* as a formal mode of address when speaking in a royal court or council, who is YHWH addressing when he says "Let **us** make man in **our** image"? Does YHWH have a royal council? Would the all-powerful Creator of the universe bother to tell His creations what He is about to do before doing it? Scripture informs us that YHWH is a wise king and like a human king he informs His subjects of

[5] See the entry "we" in the *New Fowler's Modern English Usage*, H.W. Fowler and R.W. Burchfield, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998.

what he is about to do. Thus we read, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* (*sod* סוֹד) to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The Hebrew word *sod* סוֹד "council" literally means a grouping of people such as an assembly or congregation, as in the verse, "Let not my soul come into their *assembly* (sod סוֹד), let not my honor be united with their congregation" (Genesis 49:6). By extension *sod* סוֹד also has the meaning of an assembly of advisors, as in the verse, "Plans are foiled without *council* (*sod* סוֹד), but they succeed through many advisors" (Prov 15:22). In this last verse most English translations render the word *sod* סוֹד as "counsel", that is, the advice given by a council of advisors. However, the Hebrew word *sod* סוֹד refers to the council of advisors itself, and only indirectly to the advice that they give.

When we read in Amos that YHWH reveals His *sod* to the prophets the meaning is that he makes known to them the secret deliberations that took place in the heavenly council. It is knowledge of these deliberations that false prophets are said to lack, as we read in Jeremiah, "For who among them has stood in the *council of YHWH* (*sod YHWH* סוֹד יְהוָה) and seen and heard His word? Who among them has listened to His word and heard?" (Jer 23:18). A true prophet has knowledge of the deliberations that take place in the "council of YHWH" whereas the false prophet lacks this knowledge. We read further in the same passage, "(21) I did not send those prophets… I did not speak to them yet they prophesied. (22) Now if they have stood in my *council* (*sod* סוֹד), let them announce my words to My people that they return from their evil way and the wickedness of their actions" (Jer 23:21-22). Again we see that the false prophets are unable to speak the word of YHWH because they have no knowledge of the deliberations that took place in His heavenly council.

What is the *sod*, the council, of YHWH? We find throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that YHWH is said to be surrounded by a large host of angels. For example, in one vision Daniel sees YHWH sitting like a king surrounded by millions of attendants:

> (9) And the Ancient One sat down, His garment like white snow, and the hair of His head like clean wool, His throne flames of fire and its wheels burning fire. (10) A river of fire flowed forth; a million attended Him and a hundred million

stood before Him. The judgment began and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9-10)

In Daniel's vision YHWH is described as a mighty king with a large council of courtiers. YHWH sits like a wise king in judgment (Prov 20:8; 29:14; 1Ki 3:28; 2Sam 15:2). The courtiers serve as YHWH's royal council of advisors and among other things keep records.

Another description of the heavenly council can be found in the vision of Michaihu ben Yimla. Michaihu was called to advise Ahab King of Israel on whether or not he should set off on his invasion of Aram. We have already seen that Ahab assembled 400 prophets all of whom told him he would be victorious in this invasion. However, one lone prophet, Michaihu ben Yimla, informed the king that he would die in battle and that the other prophets had been misled by a false spirit of prophecy. Michaihu explains how this false spirit of prophecy came to infect Ahab's prophets:

> (19) And he said, therefore, listen to the word of YHWH. I saw YHWH sitting on His throne and the entire host of heaven standing on His right and on His left. (20) And YHWH said, 'Who will tempt Ahab that he go up and fall in the highlands of Gilead.' And one said, 'In this manner' and another said, 'In that manner.' (21) And a certain spirit went forth and stood before YHWH and said, 'I will tempt him.' And YHWH said to him, 'In what manner?' (22) And he said, 'I will go out and be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And He said, 'You shall tempt and be successful. Go and make it so!' (1Ki 22:19-22).

In Michayahu's vision YHWH sits like a king on His throne surrounded by His royal council which consists of the "entire host of heaven". The "host of heaven" refers to the angels, as in the verse, "Praise Him, all His angels! Praise Him, all His hosts!" (Ps 148:2). YHWH consults His angels in the same way as a flesh and blood king might consult the members of his *royal council*. The angels raise various proposals ("And one said, 'In this manner' and another said, 'In that manner.'"). Finally a "spirit" comes forth and proposes that it be a spirit of false prophecy in the mouth of Ahab's prophets. YHWH accepts the proposal and orders the spirit to carry out the mission.

Another description of the heavenly council appears in the book of Job. We read there, "And it was a certain time, and the *sons of God* came to stand before YHWH" (Job 1:6; 2:1). What follows is a deliberation between YHWH and a satanic angel, similar to that which took place in the vision of Michaihu between YHWH and the spirit of false prophecy.

The "sons of God" that comprise the members of the heavenly court are the angels. The angels are called "sons of God" because they are holy as YHWH's chosen messengers. The Israelites are also described as *sons of God*, as we read in Deuteronomy:

> (1) You are sons of YHWH your God, you shall not cut yourselves nor place a baldness on your head for the dead. (2) Because you are a holy nation to YHWH your God, and YHWH has chosen you to be His chosen people out of all the nations on the face of the earth. (Dt 14:1-2).

Israel is forbidden to partake in pagan mourning practices because they are "sons of YHWH", which means they are a "holy nation to YHWH", a "chosen nation". So to be a "son of God" simply means to be *holy, chosen by God*.

The angels are called "sons of God" in Job because they too are "chosen" and "holy". In fact, one of the biblical terms for angel is *kadosh* קָדוֹשׁ "holy one".[6] The phrase "holy ones" is used to refer to angels of the *heavenly council* in Ps 89:6, "May your wonder, O YHWH, be professed in heaven; even your faithfulness in the congregation of **holy ones**" (Ps 89:6). This "congregation of holy ones" קְהַל קְדֹשִׁים in Ps 89:6 is also called the "sons of God (*benei elim* בְּנֵי אֵלִים)" (Ps 89:7) and the "great *council* (*sod* סוֹד) of holy ones" (Ps 89:8).

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[6] Daniel sees an angel in a vision which he describes as a "holy one" (Daniel 8:13). In Nebuchadnezzar's dream he sees "an angel and a holy one coming down from heaven" (Daniel 4:10 [Aramaic]). The phrase "an angel and a holy one" is an example of the stylistic device *hendiadys*, that is, "two that are one" in which two words indicate the same thing. This means that "angel" and "holy one" are functionally synonymous in this context. The terms "angel" and "son of God" are also used synonymously. When Nebuchadnezzar throws Daniel's three companions into the fiery furnace, he is surprised to see a fourth person in the furnace with them. He explains that "the appearance of the fourth one is like a **son of God** (*bar elahin* בַּר אֱלָהִין)" (Daniel 3:25 [Aramaic]). Only a few verses later Nebuchadnezzar declares, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Aved-Nego who sent His **angel** (*malacheh* מַלְאֲכֵהּ) and saved His servants who trusted in Him"(Daniel 3:28 [Aramaic]). Thus when Nebuchadnezzar sees a man with the appearance of "a son of God" he knows this to be an "angel" (*malach* מַלְאָךְ) of God.

The Divine "We"

We have seen that kings and courtiers use the *royal we* as a formal mode of address in the royal council. We have also seen that YHWH is described as being surrounded by a heavenly council of angels. In the sixth chapter of Isaiah we find that YHWH uses the *royal we* when addressing this heavenly council. In Isaiah's vision he sees YHWH on His throne surrounded by the heavenly council of angels:

> (1) In the year that king Uziyahu died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and elevated, and His train filling the sanctuary. (2) Burning-ones (*seraphim*) standing above him, six wings each one, with two it covers its face, and with two its legs, and with two it flies. (3) And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts, the entire earth is filled with his glory… (8) And I heard the voice of the Lord saying "Who shall **I** send and who shall go for **us**?" and I said "Here I am, send me!" And He said, "Go and say to this people…" (Isaiah 6:1-3,8-9)

YHWH is sitting on His throne as the king of the entire universe surrounded by fiery angels. As in the vision of Michaihu, YHWH addresses his court asking whom He should send on the divine mission. When addressing the heavenly council YHWH freely switches off between "I" and the *royal we*, even in mid-sentence! YHWH says, "Who shall **I** send and who shall go for **us**?" This is reminiscent of Ahab's question to his royal council, "Shall **we** go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall **I** hold back" (2Chr 18:5). Both YHWH and Ahab freely switch off between "I" and the *royal we* when addressing the royal/ heavenly council.

The Royal We in Genesis

When YHWH says in Genesis 3:26, "Let **us** make man in **our** image after **our** likeness" He is also addressing the heavenly council of angels. The same is true when He says, "Behold the man has become as one of **us**, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22) and "Let **us** go down and let **us** mix up their language there" (Genesis 11:7). In all three instances YHWH is speaking to His heavenly council of angels as He did in the visions of Michaihu and Isaiah and in the book of Job. This is also what is meant in the verse, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* (sod סוֹד) to His

servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). We see from this that YHWH's actions are deliberated upon in His *heavenly council* of angels. The use of the *royal we* is simply a formal mode of address employed when speaking before such a council. It can be freely used by kings and courtiers, but it does not imply the king or courtier is a multiplicity. Daniel, Bildad, and Ahab all spoke in this fashion even though they were all singular individuals with single personalities. YHWH, the king of the entire universe, also speaks in this fashion before His heavenly council of angels. Yet when YHWH acts he is always described as acting alone as a singular individual. Thus in the first "we" passage we find, "And Elohim **(he)** created man in **His** image" and **not** "And Elohim **(they)** created man in **their** image". In the second "we" passage we find, "And **(he)** YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden" and **not** "And **(they)** YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". Finally, in the third "we" passage we find "And **(he)** YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth" and **not** "And **(they)** YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". Although YHWH brought up these actions for deliberation in the heavenly council, when they were actually carried out YHWH is said to have done them alone, for YHWH is the sole master of all creation, as it is written:

> "(5) I am YHWH and there is no other; besides Me there are no gods; I have girded you even though you did not know Me. (6) So that they will know from the rising of the sun to the setting that there is none besides Me; I am YHWH and there is no other. (7) The one who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil, I YHWH do all these things." (Isaiah 45:5-7)

Elohim: Plurality and "Attraction"

Part 3

by Nehemia Gordon

In part 1 it was observed that YHVH is called *Elohim*, a plural noun with the plural suffix *-im* יִ֖ם . However, we saw that Elohim is not a numerical plural denoting more than one god but rather a majestic plural denoting greatness and having a numerically singular meaning. This was clear from the adjectives and verbs that accompany Elohim. A numerical plural (e.g. dogs) would be accompanied by plural verbs and plural adjectives. However, Elohim appears over 2000 times in the Tanakh and in virtually every occurrence it is accompanied by singular verbs and singular adjectives.

But what of those instances in which Elohim does have plural adjectives and verbs? Of course, there are numerous instances in which Elohim really is meant in the plural sense and therefore receives plural verbs and adjectives. For example, when the Philistines are plagued by the Holy Ark they cry out in desperation:

> Woe to us! Who shall save us from the hand of these (*'eleh* אֵ֫לֶּה) great (*ha'adirim* הָאַדִּירִים) gods, these (*eleh* אֵ֫לֶּה) gods are they (*hem* הֵ֫ם) that **(they)** smote (*hamakim* הַמַּכִּים**)** the Egyptians with every plague in the desert. (1 Samuel 4:8).

The Phillistines use the word Elohim along with a plural adjective ("great" *ha'adirim* הָאַדִּירִים), plural pronouns ("these" *eleh* אֵ֫לֶּה; "they" *hem* הֵ֫ם), and even a plural verb ("**they** that smote/ smite" *hamakim* הַמַּכִּים) and there can be little doubt that when they said Elohim they meant "gods." But, the Philistines were heathens who believed in many gods. What interests us are those instances in which Elohim is presumably a majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning but nevertheless has a plural verb or plural adjective. There are a small number of such instances in the entire Tanakh, which we shall presently consider.

Elohim with Plural Verbs

The first instance of Elohim with a plural verb is in Gen 20:13. In this passage Abraham explains to Abimelech how he plotted with Sarah to lie about her being his sister:

> And it was when God caused me to wander (*hit'u oti Elohim* הִתְע֤וּ אֹתִי֙ אֱלֹהִ֔ים) from the house of my father, that I said to her, this is the righteousness that you shall do with me, to every place which we come, say about me, he is my brother[7]

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[7] וַיְהִ֞י כַּאֲשֶׁ֧ר **הִתְע֣וּ אֹתִ֣י אֱלֹהִ֗ים** מִבֵּ֣ית אָבִי֮ וָאֹמַ֣ר לָהּ֒ זֶ֣ה חַסְדֵּ֔ךְ אֲשֶׁ֥ר תַּעֲשִׂ֖י עִמָּדִ֑י | אֶ֤ל כָּל־הַמָּקוֹם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר נָב֣וֹא שָׁ֔מָּה אִמְרִי־לִ֖י אָחִ֥י הֽוּא: (בראשית כ:יג)

The phrase "God caused me to wander" *hit'u oti Elohim* הִתְעוּ אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים has the plural verb *hit'u* הִתְעוּ meaning "**they** caused to wander" (hif'il past 3rd pl ת.ע.ה.). So contrary to the expected rule of Elohim getting a singular verb, here Elohim gets a plural verb. Because of this plural verb, we could literally translate this phrase "gods caused me to wander." From this verse alone it indeed appears that Abraham worshipped multiple gods whom he believed had caused him to wander from his father's house. However, this hardly fits the overall picture. In Gen 24 Abraham again refers to God taking him from his father's house and this time the verb accompanying Elohim is singular:

> YHVH, the Elohim of heaven, who took me (*lekachani* לְקָחַנִי) from the house of my father, and from my birthplace, and who spoke (*diber* דִּבֶּר) to me, and who swore (*nishba'* נִשְׁבַּע) to me saying, to your seed I will give this land. (Gen 24:7)

In this passage Elohim is accompanied by three singular verbs: *lekachani* לְקָחַנִי "**He** took me", *diber* דִּבֶּר "**He** spoke", and *nishba'* נִשְׁבַּע "**He** swore." When Abraham talks about YHVH taking him from his father's house in Gen 20 he refers to Him as a numerical plural but in Gen 24 he refers to Him as a numerical singular. How can we explain this paradox?

Some exegetes, desperate to make sense of this difficult passage, have suggested that Abraham was speaking about YHVH in the plural because he was addressing Abimelech, an idolater who worshipped many gods. This explanation might work, were this the only time that we found Elohim accompanied by a plural verb. However, in Gen 35:7 we find a second instance of this phenomenon. In this passage, we read about how Jacob built an altar at Bethel after his vision of the ladder:

> And he built there an altar and called the place, El Bet El, because there God revealed himself (pl) to him (*niglu elav ha'elohim* **נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים**) when he fled from his brother.[8]

The phrase "God revealed himself (pl) to him" (*niglu elav ha'elohim* נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים) has the plural verb *niglu* נִגְלוּ meaning "they revealed themselves" or alternatively "they were revealed" (*nif'al* past 3rd pl ג.ל.ה.). We could literally translate this phrase as "the gods (they) revealed themselves to him." Again, we find Elohim accompanied by a plural verb

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[8] וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא לַמָּקוֹם אֵל בֵּית אֵל | כִּי שָׁם **נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים** בְּבָרְחוֹ מִפְּנֵי אָחִיו: (בראשית לה:ז)

contrary to the expected rule for a majestic plural. Here we can hardly say that someone is trying to speak in the terms of an idolater since it is the narrator (Moses) himself who says these words. From these two verses in Genesis we might conclude that God is a plurality. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that in Genesis alone the word Elohim, referring to YHVH, gets singular verbs, adjectives, or pronouns some 157 times and only in these two instances does it receive plural verbs.[9]

A third instance of Elohim getting a plural verb appears in 2 Samuel 7:23 where David prays to YHVH:

> "And who is like Your **(sg)** people (*che'amcha* כְעַמְּךָ) Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim **(they)** went (*halchu* הָלְכוּ) to redeem for Himself (*lo* לוֹ) as a people"

In this verse David boasts that Israel is unique because God "redeemed" the Israelites for Himself, that is, he metaphorically paid their redemption price, thereby purchasing Israel as His own. The phrase "whom Elohim went to redeem" contains the plural verb *halchu* הָלְכוּ meaning "they went", that is "Elohim **(they)** went" rather than the expected singular verb *halach* הָלַךְ "Elohim **(he)** went." Here again it appears that Elohim receives a plural verb contrary to the expected rule for majestic plural.

However, in this passage we also find Elohim referred to as a numerical singular. David says *che'amcha* כְעַמְּךָ "like Your people." In Hebrew the word "your" is expressed by a "possesive suffix" attached to the end of a word. But unlike English, Hebrew actually has four different words or suffixes for "your" depending on whether the "your" in question is masculine or feminine and singular or plural:

Four Types of "Your" in Hebrew		
	singular	plural
masculine	*-cha* ךָ	*-chem* כֶם
feminine	*-ach* ךְ	*-chen* כֶן

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[9] Elohim appears a total of 217 times in Genesis. In many instances there is no verb accompanying Elohim, e.g. Gen 17:18 וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים "And Abraham said to Elohim". Of the 217 times Elohim appears in Genesis, 157 have singular verbs, adjectives, or pronouns accompanying them, 52 are without any verb, adjective, or pronoun, 6 refer to pagan gods (Gen 31:30, 32; 31:53 (3 times); 35:2, and 2 have plural verbs.

All four Hebrew suffixes translate into English as "your." In Hebrew we can know based on which suffix is used whether the "your" in question is singular or plural. Now David refers to Elohim as "Your" with the masculine singular suffix *-cha* הָ . Were Elohim a numerical plural David would have referred to Him as "Your" with the plural suffix *-chem* כֶם . When David refers to Elohim as "your" with the singular suffix *-cha* הָ it is clear that he understands YHVH to be a numerical singular.

Again in this same verse, David says that Elohim has redeemed Israel "for Himself (*lo* לוֹ) as a people." The Hebrew word *lo* לוֹ "for Himself" also makes it clear that David thinks of Elohim as a singular. Were Elohim meant as a plural David would have said that Elohim redeemed Israel "for themselves" *lahem* לָהֶם. Since David did not say this we must conclude that he understood Elohim to be a numerical singular.

Our conclusion about Elohim being a numerical singular in David's prayer is confirmed by the Book of Chronicles. Chronicles repeats many of the accounts reported in Samuel and Kings, often slightly paraphrasing them. In 1Chr 17:21 David's prayer appears word for word but with a slight difference:

> "And who is like Your people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim **(he)** went (*halach* הָלַךְ) to redeem for Himself a people"

In the Chronicler's paraphrase of David's prayer, the phrase "whom Elohim went to redeem for Himself" no longer has the plural verb *halchu* הָלְכוּ "**they** went", but instead has the singular verb *halach* הָלַךְ "**He** went." So the Chronicler understood David as referring to a numerical singular Elohim and this is reflected in his paraphrase of David's prayer.

Clearly Elohim is a numerical singular, even in David's prayer in which it receives a plural verb. But the basic question still remains. Why are there these handful of instances in the Tanakh where Elohim receives a plural verb? The fact that David clearly meant to express Elohim as a numerical singular only heightens this questions. Let us remember that the rule of Elohim receiving a singular verb does actually work in some 2000 instances and there are only a handful of exceptions in the entire Tanakh. So why would a majestic plural, which expresses a numerical singular and which is supposed to receive a singular verb, nevertheless receive a plural verb? Is it because Elohim is both a plurality

and a singularity at the same time? Could it be that these anomalous verses hint at some great mystery about the paradoxical and contradictory nature of God? Or is there a much simpler, linguistic explanation?

Plurality and the Golden Calf

To answer this question we must consider other instances in which a majestic plural receives a plural verb but where the majestic plural in question does not refer to YHVH. An interesting example can be found in the incident of the Golden Calf in Ex 32. When Moses delayed in returning from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites rebelled against YHVH and made for themselves a molten calf:

> "(3) And all the nation broke the golden rings in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (4) And he took from their hands and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf, and they said: 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who **(they)** brought you up (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ) from the Land of Egypt'" (Ex 32:3-4)

We can see that the golden calf is called an Elohim and then twice referred to as plural both by the demonstrative pronoun "these" (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) and by the verb "**they** brought you up" (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ). The problem here is that the golden calf itself is a singular calf. Why would the Israelites call a single calf "gods?" As we read further in the account it is clear that we are dealing with a single false god. Thus v.5 continues: "And Aaron saw and built an altar in front of **him** (*lefanav* לְפָנָיו)." The "him" being referred to is the singular calf. Were the calf a multiplicity of gods v.5 would have said that Aaron built an altar before "them" (*lifnehem* לִפְנֵיהֶם). Again in v.8 YHVH tells Moses about Israel's sin with the golden calf, "they bowed down to **him** and they sacrificed to **him**." Again there is one singular calf. So why would the Israelites refer to the golden calf in the plural? Did the Israelites believe this single golden calf to contained within it a plurality of gods or personalities? There is evidence that this is not the case. In the book of Nehemiah the Levites offer a prayer which retells the story of the golden calf. In this Levitical paraphrase we read:

"They even made for themselves a molten calf, and said, 'This (zeh זֶה) is your Elohim who **(he)** brought you up (he'elcha הֶעֶלְךָ) from Egypt'"[10] (Neh 9:18).

In the Levitical paraphrase in Nehemiah the declaration of the Israelites about the golden calf has been transferred into the singular. Instead of "these are your Elohim" we now read "this (*zeh* זֶה) is your Elohim." Instead of "**they** brought you up" (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ) we now read "he brought you up" (*he'elcha* הֶעֶלְךָ). Clearly the Levites in the time of Nehemiah understood the golden calf as a numerically singular false god, and not as a multiplicity of gods. In other words, when the Levites in the time of Nehemiah read the words of the Israelites in the desert about the golden calf, 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶה) are your Elohim, Israel, who **(they)** brought you up (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ) from the Land of Egypt' they understood them to mean 'This (zeh זֶה) is your Elohim who **(he)** brought you up (he'elcha הֶעֶלְךָ) from Egypt'.

<u>**Attraction**</u>

What did the Levites in the time of Nehemiah know that we have not yet considered? Is there some linguistic phenomenon that could explain why the Israelites in the desert would speak about a numerically singular golden calf as if it were a plurality using a plural verb? As a matter of fact there is. Numerous languages contain a linguistic phenomenon called "attraction." Attraction occurs when a verb, adjective, or pronoun is influenced by a nearby noun, resulting in a deviation from the expected number or gender. The *American Heritage Book of English Usage*[11] brings the following example of attraction in English:

> *When you get to the stop light, there's a gas station on the left and a grocery store on the right.*

Strictly speaking this sentence should read "there are a gas station on the left and a grocery store on the right" since gas station and grocery store are two items and therefore require the plural verb "are." The *American Heritage Book of English Usage* explains: "Although this usage would seem to violate the rules of subject and verb agreement, the

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[10] אַף כִּי עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מַסֵּכָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֶלְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם

[11] *The American Heritage® Book of English Usage: A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1996, §63

attraction of the verb to the singular noun phrase following it is so strong that it is hard to avoid the construction entirely."

This sort of attraction is common in Hebrew. For example, we read in Gen 3:8 "and the man and his wife **(he)** hid (*vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא)." The Hebrew uses the singular *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא "and he hid" even though both Adam and his wife hid. Grammatically we should expect to find "and they hid" *vayitchab'u* וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ. But the verb is "attracted" to "the man" which is physically adjacent in the sentence, causing the expected plural verb "and they hid" *vayitchab'u* וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ to be superceded by the singular "and he hid" *vayitchabe* וַיִּתְחַבֵּא. Quite simply the verb latches onto the nearby noun and becomes modified by it. This is indeed extremely common in lists of multiple members. Whenever there is a list in Hebrew of "X and Y" this list should, grammatically speaking, receive a plural verb. So proper Hebrew grammar would require: "X and Y **(they)** did Z." Yet a list such as this often results in attraction: "X and Y **(he)** did Z."

To better understand attraction let us consider the following example:

"And Miriam and Aaron **(she)** spoke (*vatedaber* וַתְּדַבֵּר)" (Nu 12:1)

"Miriam and Aaron" should have received the verb "and **they** spoke" *vayedabru* וַיְדַבְּרוּ, but because of attraction the verb changes to "and she spoke" *vatedaber* וַתְּדַבֵּר. Of course, in Hebrew the verb often comes before the noun, so in the above verse the word order is actually: "And (she) spoke Miriam and Aaron." Because of the verb's position in the sentence, it is attracted to the feminine singular Miriam and we end up with the almost comical "and she spoke" to describe the actions of both Miriam and Aaron. To be sure, attraction is an exception to the rule and usually we will find singular verbs for singular subjects and plural verbs for plural subjects. But attraction is common enough that we may not dismiss it as an error; instead it is a genuine linguistic phenomenon.[12]

Attraction also occurs in adjectives. We may remember that in Hebrew the adjective must match the noun in number and gender. So a singular noun gets a singular adjective. Yet sometimes the adjective is attracted to a nearby noun causing it to become plural. A well-

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[12] In fact attraction is the rule when it comes to verbs that precede two or more subjects apparently occurring in about 86% of the time, see M. Moreshet, "The Predicate which Precedes Two Subjects in the Language of Scripture", *Leshonenu* 31 (1967) pp.251-260 [Hebrew]. Moreshet also brings examples where the verb is attracted to one of the nouns when it follows the multiple subjects although this is relatively rare, e.g. Ex 9:31; 10:24; Nu 14:25; Isa 51:3.

known example appears in the Song of Hanna in 1 Sam 2:4. In the standard English translations we read: "The bows of the mighty men are broken" [KJV]. But what it actually says in Hebrew is:

"The **bow** (*keshet* קֶשֶׁת) of the mighty men (*giborim* גִּבֹּרִים) **are** broken (*chatim* חַתִּים)."

The Hebrew word *chatim* חַתִּים "are broken" is a plural adjective. But the noun that this adjective is modifying is *keshet* קֶשֶׁת "bow", a feminine **singular** noun. The adjective should have been *chata* חַתָּה "is broken" in the feminine singular so as to match the feminine singular noun. But the adjective was "attracted" to the nearby *giborim* גִּבֹּרִים "of the mighty men" and took on its gender and number changing the expected *chata* חַתָּה "is broken" to *chatim* חַתִּים "are broken." The result is the awkward sentence "the bow are broken" rather than the grammatically correct "the bow is broken!" Essentially what happened here is that the feminine singular adjective *chata* חַתָּה "is broken" was "attracted" by the nearby masculine plural suffix *-im* ◌ים and as a result adopted this suffix.

Attraction and the Golden Calf

Now that we understand the phenomenon of attraction, we can understand why the golden calf is referred to in the plural. The declaration of the Israelites, 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who **(they)** brought you up (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ) from the Land of Egypt', contains two instances of attraction. The masculine plural ending in the word Elohim attracted the verb ("they brought you up" *he'elcha* הֶעֱלְךָ) and the demonstrative pronoun ("these" *eleh* אֵלֶּה) making them plural as well. This happened even though Elohim was intended as a numerical singular. The masculine plural form of the word Elohim had more attractive pull than the numerically singular meaning. As a result, it appears that the Israelites are referring to the golden calf as multiple false-gods when really they meant only a singular false-god. Thus when the Israelites said, 'These (*eleh* אֵלֶּה) are your Elohim, Israel, who **(they)** brought you up (*he'elucha* הֶעֱלוּךָ) from the Land of Egypt', they really meant the singular, 'This (zeh זֶה) is your Elohim, Israel, who **(he)** brought you up (*he'elcha* הֶעֶלְךָ) from the Land of Egypt' (just as Hanna really meant "the

bow of the mighty men **is** broken"). This was correctly understood by the Levites in the time of Nehemiah who transferred the statement about the golden calf into the singular.[13]

The same thing must have occurred in the handful of instances in which Elohim received a plural verb. When Abraham said "when gods caused me to wander (*hit'u oti Elohim* הִתְעוּ אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים)" he really meant "when God caused me to wander (*hit'a oti Elohim* הִתְעָה אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים)." Similarly, when we read in the Torah about Jacob's experience at Beth El that, "there gods revealed themselves to him (*niglu elav ha'elohim* נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים)" we must understand this as, "there God revealed himself to him (*nigla elav ha'elohim* נִגְלָה אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים)." In both instances the masculine plural suffix of Elohim overrode the numerically singular meaning of the majestic plural, and as a result Elohim received plural verbs. That this is what is happening is clearest from the prayer of David. Although David said, "who is like Your **(sg)** people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim **(they)** went (*halchu* הָלְכוּ) to redeem for Himself" he really meant, "who is like Your **(sg)** people Israel, even one nation in the earth, whom Elohim **(he)** went (*halach* הָלַךְ) to redeem for Himself" and this is how the prayer is correctly understood by the Chronicler. What is significant about David's prayer is that despite the grammatical attraction which affects the verb, the numerically singular meaning of Elohim still survives and thus David refers to Israel as "Your people" in the **singular** and says that Elohim redeemed Israel "for Himself", again in the **singular**.

Elohim with Plural Adjective

Alongside the handful of examples where Elohim receives a plural verb, there are a small number of examples where Elohim receives a plural adjective and these too must be understood as attraction. In five separate instances (Dt 5:26; 1 Sam 17:26; 1 Sam 17:36; Jer 10:10; Jer 23:36) we find the phrase *Elohim chayyim* אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים "living God" in which Elohim gets the masculine **plural** adjective *chayyim* חַיִּים "living" (pl). As a majestic plural Elohim should have received the masculine **singular** adjective *chay* חַי "living" (sg). The expected phrase *Elohim chay* אֱלֹהִים חַי actually appears in four other instances

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[13] It is worth noting that when the Israelites called the golden calf an Elohim they meant that it was a "great god" or an "absolute god" since this is the connotation of the *majestic plural*. Another example of Elohim as a *majestic plural* not referring to YHVH which receives a plural verb due to attraction can be found in 1 Sam 28:12-14 where the spirit of Samuel is mistaken by the necromancer for "an Elohim... ascending (*Elohim 'olim* אֱלֹהִים... עֹלִים) from the earth" (1Sam 28:13), "ascending" *'olim* עֹלִים being a plural verb (ע.ל.ה *Qal* participle masculine plural).

(2Ki 19:4, 16; Isaiah 37:4, 17). But in the five instances of *Elohim chayyim* אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים "living God" with the plural adjective we must determine whether the adjective has been made plural by attraction to Elohim's plural suffix or whether it is a numerical plural with the meaning "living gods." To answer this let us consider two instructive examples. In Dt 5:26 we read,

> "For who among all flesh has heard the voice of the living (*chayyim* חַיִּים) Elohim speaking (*medaber* מְדַבֵּר) from the midst of the fire like us and lived."

The adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים is plural, even though as a majestic plural Elohim should have received a singular adjective. However, we also see that the verb "speaking" *medaber* מְדַבֵּר is masculine **singular**. So while the adjective *chayyim* חַיִּים is attracted to Elohim's plural ending, Elohim does not lose its numerically singular meaning and as a result it still gets a singular verb.

A similar example can be found in Jer 10:10 where we read:

> "Now YHVH, He (*hu* הוּא) is a true[14] Elohim, a living (*chayyim* חַיִּים) Elohim, and king (*umelech* וּמֶלֶךְ) of the universe; from His wrath (*mikitspo* מִקִּצְפּוֹ) does the earth quake, and the nations are unable to withstand His indignation (*za'emo* זַעְמוֹ)."

Again, Elohim receives the plural adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים but is nevertheless referred to no less than four times as a numerical singular. Elohim is called "He" *hu* הוּא and "king" *melech* מֶלֶךְ while reference is made to "His wrath" and "His indignation." Were Elohim a numerical plural we would expect to read that "They (*hem* הֵם) are true Elohim" and that Elohim are "kings" (*melachim* מְלָכִים) while reference would be made to "their wrath" (*kitspam* קִצְפָּם) and "their indignation" (*za'emam* זַעְמָם). The fact that Elohim is repeatedly referred to as a numerical singular "He" supports the explanation that the adjective "living" *chayyim* חַיִּים has merely been attracted to Elohim's plural suffix and not that the intended meaning is "living gods."

Another example of Elohim receiving a plural adjective is in Joshua 24:19:

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[14] The word "true" *emet* אֱמֶת only has a singular form and therefore is indecisive as to the numerical value of Elohim.

"And Joshua said to the nation, You will not be able to serve YHVH, because **He** (*hu* הוּא) is a holy (*kedoshim* קְדֹשִׁים) Elohim, **He** (*hu* הוּא) is a zealous **God** (*el* אֵל), **He** shall not forgive (*yisa* יִשָּׂא) your transgressions and your sins."

In this verse Elohim receives the *plural* adjective "holy" *kedoshim* קְדֹשִׁים rather than the expected singular adjective "holy" *kadosh* קָדוֹשׁ. Yet in the same verse Elohim is referred to no less than four times as a numerical singular. It is worth noting that in this verse it would be impossible to read Elohim as a numerical plural since this would result in the nonsensical sentence "He are holy gods!" So we must understand the plural adjective *kedoshim* קְדֹשִׁים as having been attracted to Elohim's plural suffix *-im* יִם ◌ while at the same time still expressing a numerically singular idea.

More Majestic Plurals

It is worth noting that YHVH is repeatedly referred to as *Adonai* אֲדֹנָי (Lord) some 440 times throughout the Tanakh. This epithet literally means "my lords" but is used as a majestic plural. As in the case of Elohim, Adonai also receives singular adjectives, verbs, and pronouns (with no exceptions) proving that it is meant as the numerically singular "Lord." Interestingly enough, even a human master is usually referred to as *Adonim* אֲדֹנִים (literally: "lords") using the majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning (e.g. Gen 24:9; 39:2; Ex 21:4; etc.). In Dan 7:18, 22, 25, 27 YHVH is referred to four times as *Elyonin* עֶלְיוֹנִין literally meaning "most high ones" but this is also a majestic plural meaning "Most High" (this time in Aramaic). Also the majestic plural *bor'echa* בּוֹרְאֶיךָ (Ecc 12:1) which means "your Creator."

Summation

YHVH is referred to as Elohim (God) throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Although Elohim is a noun with the plural ending *-im* יִם ◌ it does not mean "gods." Hebrew distinguishes between a numerical plural and a majestic plural by the verbs, adjectives, and pronouns that accompany the noun. A numerically plural noun gets plural verbs, adjectives and pronouns while a numerically singular noun, even with a plural ending, gets singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. Of course, when Elohim is used as a numerical plural meaning "gods", for example, when used by idolators to refer to their false gods, it does have plural verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. However, when referring

to YHVH, Elohim always has singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns, making it clear that it is a numerical singular, despite the plural suffix. There are a small number of exceptions to this rule, a few where Elohim has plural verbs and a few more where Elohim has plural adjectives. Yet even in these passages Elohim retains its meaning of a numerical singular. Thus we find the awkward statement: "He is a living Elohim" where the adjective "living" is plural alongside the singular pronoun "He." Such anomalies are best explained as "attraction", meaning that the singular verb or adjective is "attracted" by the plural suffix of Elohim and as a result it becomes plural. Although attraction is an exception to the general rule it is hardly rare in Hebrew and indeed is found in many languages, ancient and modern. We even have a parallel use of a majestic plural with plural verbs in the incident of the golden calf. Here Elohim is clearly meant as a numerical singular even though it is accompanied by a plural verb. This is also what is happening in the instances in which Elohim referring to YHVH has plural verbs or adjectives. Of course, these are rare cases occurring only about a dozen times out of some 2000 appearances of Elohim.

YHVH is also referred to by the epithet Adonai (Lord) which is also a majestic plural with a numerically singular meaning. Like Elohim, Adonai always has singular verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. In Aramaic YHVH is also called Elyonin, Most High, another majestic plural.

Further examples of attraction:

וַיֹּאמַר אָדָם אַךְ פְּרִי לַצַּדִּיק | אַךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים **שֹׁפְטִים** בָּאָרֶץ: Ps 58:12

כִּי מִי גוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ אֱלֹהִים **קְרֹבִים** אֵלָיו | כַּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל קָרְאֵנוּ אֵלָיו: Dt 4:7