

Current Approaches to Psalm 82

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality exist in our world, none of us can truly rest.” —Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa

INTERPRETING PSALM 82 HAS been a complex discussion. Scholarship is filled with varied and broad interest in finding meaning in such a psalm, with unique features that do not fit easily in the religious context of the Hebrew Bible. Scholarship is still tackling questions about the text that were raised nearly one hundred years ago. The aim of this thesis is to identify meaning by considering new approaches to the reading and understanding the text in its ancient Near Eastern context.

Psalm 82:1 reads: אֱלֹהִים נִצָּב בְּעֵדֹתֵי אֱל בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט. The opening line of the psalm invites speculation about technical aspects—like syntax and grammar; as well as qualitative aspects—like cultural and religious relevance. The content elicits discussion about dating, provenance, and genre. And with all this, there is the underlying question of how and why the psalm was retained in its complex and unorthodox form by compilers of the Psalter.

There are aspects of Psalm 82 that have been overlooked for analysis. Past scholarship has been caught up in prioritizing a god-identity aspect of the psalm, i.e. identifying the אֱלֹהִים referenced in the opening lines through which the rest of the psalm finds its meaning. However, there are other features in the psalm that also demand attention. One aspect which has been explored to some extent is the psalm’s literary heritage which draws on mythological elements. This deserves a more direct literary comparison by which the provenance of Psalm 82 can be situated culturally and literarily. Another aspect which demands further exploration is the psalm’s resistance to easily conform to monotheistic expectations of the Hebrew Bible Psalter. The third aspect, which is perhaps the most neglected, is

the concentrated linguistic focus on marginalized members of society—an ethical concern. This study seeks to bring to light a more meaningful reading of Psalm 82 by asking different questions and ultimately pursuing an ethical interpretation in light of ancient Near Eastern values concerning matters of justice for society's marginalized.

In the past, scholars have approached their interpretation of Psalm 82 by making the main issue one of securing the identity of the אֱלֹהִים and their (divine, or sometimes royal) agency throughout the psalm. This approach has led to a debate that largely begins with an underlying premise that the god of the Hebrew Bible is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. It is this theological assumption that motivates attempts to disambiguate the identity of the divine in Psalm 82 and limits the imagination to exempt ambiguous readings which would allow for more polysemy in the text. This approach to interpretation is problematic for two reasons:

1. Psalm 82 does not seem concerned with making clear the identity of the אֱלֹהִים. Its use is obscured by awkward grammatical construction and multiple roots of meaning, suggesting intention on the part of the author. While identifying the אֱלֹהִים has presented a challenge for many scholars, it may be possible to consider an alternative to disambiguating its use in the psalm. This study will explore why the composer might be elusive in identifying the אֱלֹהִים and how the interpretation of Psalm 82 could be furthered through considering deliberate ambiguity as a means of drawing readers toward the central idea of justice for the poor.
2. Psalm 82 includes an intense concentration of language regarding marginalized persons that seems to suggest the psalm is largely concerned with addressing the problems in social order. While this issue is not completely ignored by past scholarship, its focus has generally centered on divine agency and clarifying a theology about who is in charge. Many approaches begin with a defense of God's innocence. Interpretations of Psalm 82 often rest on an eisegetical assumption that the psalm is somehow defending God and a limited group of chosen people, justifying theological focus from polytheistic views toward monotheistic practice. One of the problems with this is the arbitrary nature of such categories as polytheism and monotheism, a bilateral construct developed in modernity. This study will alternatively explore why and how Psalm 82 incorporates implicit ethical instruction in which the composer presents a social problem for ethical consideration among a broader community, regardless of theistic adherents.

Scholarship seems to have halted any further discussion of meaning for the psalm in its attempt to satisfy a need for disambiguating the interpretation of אֱלֹהִים in the psalm in such a way that continues to respond to the initial curiosities raised by Morgenstern in his 1939 thesis on Psalm 82.¹ This psalm represents a point of consternation in the Hebrew Bible: potentially ambiguous, potentially non-conformist, potentially resistant. This study explores these attributes as essential to interpreting Psalm 82 as an ethical text.

This study will demonstrate that the key to understanding Psalm 82 is recognizing its polysemy and contextual linguistic, literary, and social situation—it's ancient formation and origination (composition) as a text centered in a world where gods have opinions about justice for the poor, and its later canonical compilation in which it resists conformity with the dogma of religious Judaic monotheism in the Second Temple period. Not only does the psalm situate uncomfortably within the religious setting of Second Temple period Judah, but it is a text that resists the religious-political climate that Persian era Jews were seeking to secure.² Furthermore, though the language of Psalm 82 is often read in a Judeo-Christian liturgical context, the psalm does not promise a future theological dogma of Yahwhism. Neither does the text, which draws upon ancient language of אֱלֹהִים, and leans toward seeking righteousness as a distinct virtue, indicate that it belongs to future Judeo-Christian dogmatic categories of religion. The text is its own composition and must be read for what it is without limiting possibilities of interpretation based on religious priorities introduced many centuries since the composition first came to life.

This study will not attempt to defend the placement of Psalm 82 in the Psalter nor attempt to describe how it fits canonically as an Elohistic psalm or an Asaphite psalm. This study seeks to make sense of the ethical message contained in Psalm 82 by considering literary features of the psalm which acknowledge implicit ethics. For this approach, reasoning will follow Zimmermann's *Organon* model for identifying implicit ethics in ancient biblical texts.³ This approach includes evaluating Psalm 82 in a way that tests for deliberate ambiguity as a means to guide the reader to the central message. Past scholarship has failed to fully explore the potential for implicit ethics and ambiguity in Psalm 82. Scholars have focused instead on a univocal reading of the psalm with attempts to reconcile difficulties by (sometimes)

1. Morgenstern, "Mythological Background."

2. Ezra–Nehemiah

3. Zimmermann, *Logic of Love*.

forcing a monologic reading. The following sections will summarize scholarship on Psalm 82 over the past century.

Several Decades of Interpretive Debate

When considering the ethical language in Psalm 82, it is surprising that in a century of scholarship the main focus of interpretation has not looked sufficiently at the matter of unmet justice. Instead, the focus has been on defining and confirming the identity of the so-called keepers of justice named in v. 1. Scholarship has tried to make sense of who is responsible for keeping justice, carefully preserving God's reputation. This effort detracts from what the text has to say about the implicit or explicit ethical imperative. The fact that there has been no clear consensus in the discussion may signal the need for an approach that allows for multiplicity in the psalm's framework. Past scholarship has been caught up in debate around the position and status of those in power, at the expense of a deeper consideration for the ethical value of the psalm and its obvious attention to weak members of society.

Psalm 82 is like a play, an unfolding drama that illustrates the importance of caring about those who are marginalized in society. While scholars are busy describing the set and costumes, they diminish the main concern of the text for the poor and the implications of injustice. The setting of Psalm 82 exists to enhance the message, and not the other way around. This study of Psalm 82 will acknowledge the research focused on the setting as peripheral to the main message and then focus more intently on the language of poverty to learn what this ancient composition has to say about ethics.

There are many variants of translation, and each depends heavily on guesswork about the origination or assumed context of the composition. For more than a century, scholars have focused on trying to define the setting of Psalm 82 in such a way that would defend and describe its inclusion in the Psalter. This has proven to be difficult, since scholars widely disagree about when, where, and why this psalm exists. The opening verse, Ps 82:1, does not fit comfortably within modern assumptions about the role of the divine, especially in a Judeo-Christian context, so translations/interpretations have varied widely during the past century. Scholars have argued for a variety of positions regarding this verse, based on their understanding:

- that the poetic phrase in v. 1 stands alone, as unique,⁴
- that v. 1 is connected to other Hebrew Bible texts,⁵
- that the psalm is connected to non-biblical Semitic texts,⁶
- that it is connected to Ugaritic literature and religion, via mythology,⁷
- that it affirms monotheistic perspectives in Israel,⁸
- that it denies monotheistic perspectives in Israel,⁹
- that its provenance is likely very early and Northern,¹⁰ or
- that it was composed late, in Judah.¹¹

These variations represent the ongoing conflict of meaning and interpretation. Obviously, many of these positions directly conflict with one another, nonetheless each is clearly argued, as will be presented in summary of scholarship in this chapter.

Though many aspects of Psalm 82 have been discussed in the existing scholarship, translating and interpreting the divine epithets is troublesome. Many scholars have set out to identify the אֱלֹהִים, its counterpart, אֱל, and the related בְּנֵי עֲלִיִּן, epithets that are used in such an uncommon way in Psalm 82. While it is difficult to find obvious parallels in the Hebrew Bible, these epithets echo other ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly among those from Ugarit. Cognate linguistic comparisons have been useful to scholars attempting to make a clear statement about who the divine agents are and what they are doing in the psalm. This has resulted in various interpretations for the epithets in Psalm 82 that seem to fit with one justification or another, as outlined below.

Some scholars have focused their analysis of Psalm 82 on the translation of אֱלֹהִים. However, this is problematic because many other scholars

4. Nasuti, *Tradition History*.

5. Demonstrated connections to Dt 32:8, to Covenant Code in Exodus, plus multiple views on the Psalter, classification of Asaph Psalm (despite Nasuti's analysis), and canonical approaches.

6. Morgenstern, and others, on ANE readings of Ps 82, including apocrypha, Ugaritic and Assyrian cognates (Draffkorn).

7. Parker and Smith, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*; Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*; Trotter, "Death of the אֱלֹהִים."

8. The Yahwhistic conclusions of the psalm are often emphasized.

9. Morgenstern and others look to polytheistic, mythological setting for explanations.

10. Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence*.

11. This is a minority view, relying on ideas that the psalm was redacted for a royal festival reading in Judah.

have made equally reasonable arguments to defend very disparate interpretations. Each of these interpretations depend on a variable translation of the epithet for אֱלֹהִים in v. 1. The problem with an interpretation of Psalm 82 that depends on a translation of אֱלֹהִים is that אֱלֹהִים can legitimately represent multiple concepts. There is a semantic range of meaning for אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible based on its use in various genres and within the Psalter. This will be described in more detail in Chapter Two.¹² The natural conclusion here is that the psalm allows for a range of interpreting the divine setting.

Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger pointed out that the interpretations of Psalm 82 fit into three categories:¹³

1. Psalm 82 is about the death of gods of the nations,
2. Psalm 82 is about the condemnation of human judges,
3. Psalm 82 reveals the “antisocial behavior of Canaanite officialdom.

The categories Zenger identified as main avenues for interpretation among twentieth-century scholars center on the topic of how rule is conducted, rather than focusing on the ethical message of Psalm 82. His findings confirmed that the central issue at stake in Psalm 82 for scholarship over the past century has been focused on the identity of the אֱלֹהִים in v. 1. While there is mention of the language about the marginalized, it is clear the emphasis of the commentary is to determine that this is primarily sourced as evidence to support judgments about existing political systems, whether human or divine.¹⁴ The aforementioned categories of interpretation center the discussion of meaning for the psalm on the rule of justice rather than the right of justice—a situation this study seeks to correct.

Pre-Twentieth-Century Scholarship

Scholarship on Psalm 82 can be dated by millenia. The Septuagint offers a reading variant in v. 1. Depending on one's view of sequence in Hebrew oral tradition, the accuracy of the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX) reflects either an emendation or correction.¹⁵ The subtle difference

12. Textual study of Ps 82:1 analysis of אֱלֹהִים.

13. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 330–31.

14. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 334.

15. Although this reading does not appear in the BHS apparatus, it has been noted by scholars. Ackerman, “An Exegetical Study of Psalm 82.” Salters, “Psalm 82:1,” 225–39.

offers some clarity in affirming the divine council setting, but it does little to resolve the ambiguities in v. 1.¹⁶

Early translators Aquila, Origen, and Targum Jonathan follow the LXX in reading the second אֱלֹהִים as referent to the Hebrew God. Aquila omitted the construct form and translated “in the midst, (God) judges.” This approach was also adopted by Symmachus and Jerome (*in medio Deus iudicat*). This view supports a scene in a divine council most likely based in Israel, with Israel’s God at the head of a divine pantheon. Aquila reads “mighty ones” for אֱלֹהִים, whom he describes as ones who receive punishment for their wickedness, though this is not described clearly in the psalm. Syriac versions of the text similarly interpret the אֱלֹהִים as patron angels of nations outside of Israel receiving judgment from Israel’s God. In the Peshitta, v. 1 indicates that God rules through these heavenly beings. Targum Jonathan also reframes v. 1 to read the אֱלֹהִים as “just judges” who thought too highly of themselves (v. 6) and therefore, they are condemned by an Israel-centered divine council. Ultimately, pre-twentieth-century LXX translators portray a divine council scene where multiple deities receive judgment¹⁷ from God, whose judgment extends from within Israel.

Early translations and commentaries interpret Psalm 82 from a pre-determined religious view that supports the just reign of one God who condemns non-Israelite nations. In traditional Jewish explanations, the אֱלֹהִים fit into two categories: 1) Israelite judges, or 2) the whole nation of Israel. These translations and commentaries are evidence of early attempts to conform the awkward grammar in the psalm to a monotheistic paradigm rather than allowing the ambiguity to stand. Ackerman proposed that the LXX represented an early tradition offensive to Jewish interpreters who wished to move the scene closer to Israel in a “deliberate attempt to tone down the polytheistic setting of this psalm.”¹⁸

Early Christian commentators approached Psalm 82 with prejudice as well. Justin Martyr (c. 100 CE) focused on vv. 6–7 as a description of the fall and punishment of the first man and woman from the garden in Genesis. Jerome (fourth century) acknowledged a divine council and posited that the judgment either represents God condemning pagan gods to die, or the judgment addresses political leaders of Israel and/or Israelite judges, who are admonished for their wickedness. Augustine (fifth century) read

16. The LXX goes on to support the reading that the second אֱלֹהִים refers to God as the subject of the 3ms verb יִשְׁפֹּט and recommends a parallel reading of the אֱלֹהִים with those in vv. 6–7.

17. cf. Origen and Theodotion

18. See Ackerman for a full discussion of early translations and interpretive implications for the mythological setting in Psalm 82. Ackerman, “Exegetical Study,” 3–5.

Psalm 82 as a rejection of the Jews. His interpretation dismissed ideas of divine beings and instead reads the psalm as God's judgment against the Jews. As early as the fifth century CE, there was no unified interpretation of Psalm 82.¹⁹

The sixteenth-century reformation shed new light on the Hebrew Bible as scripture, yet there was still no consensus in the translation and interpretation of Psalm 82. By this time, three categorizations had solidified for the condemned in the psalm: 1) rulers and judges in Israel,²⁰ 2) rulers and judges of the nations,²¹ or 3) the members of God's divine council.²² And so it was up until the twentieth century and, as it appears in the Hermeneia commentary, these are some of the categories still debated in scholarship today.²³

19. Also see Ackerman for an extended discussion of the influences of early Christian church interpretations of Psalm 82. Ackerman, "Exegetical Study," 34–36.

20. Luther claimed the condemned אֱלֹהִים were judges of Israel, although, in his time, he applied this to German rulers. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*, 38–72. Other scholars shared this view in various forms: Hengstenberg, *Commentary*, 29–38; Graetz, *Kritischer Commentar*, 479; Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary*, 460–63; Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 494–97; Thalhofer, *Hausprälaten und Dompropstes*, 530–31; Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, 211; Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*; Kittel, *The Religion of the People*, 275–77; Berry, *The Book of Psalms*, 161–62; Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 101.

21. Calvin extended the אֱלֹהִים to include a larger group, beyond the Israelites. Calvin, *Commentary*, 327–34. Other scholars shared this view in various forms: Hitzig, *Urgeschichte und Mythologie*, 188–91; Baethgen, *Die Psalmen*, 257–59; Buttenwieser, *The Psalms*, 764–65; Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, 199–200; Calâes, *Le Livre des Psaumes*, 82–83.

22. Syriac commentaries suggest that the אֱלֹהִים are gods or angels. Ibn Ezra described the אֱלֹהִים as guardian angels set by God over the nations. Other scholars aligned themselves with this view. Gunkel was the first scholar to analyze and differentiate psalms according to literary types. He fostered comparisons with ancient Near Eastern sources. Gunkel made significant connections between ancient Near Eastern religious motifs and those in the Hebrew Bible. Gunkel described Psalm 82 as referring to angels in Post-Exilic Judah. He proposed that the psalms were developed first by early Israelite prophets, and then they were brought formally into the Jewish cult after the exile. Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 98–116, 330–57. Mowinckel disagreed with Gunkel on dating and application of Psalm 82, instead placing the psalm in pre-exilic Israel at a fall enthronement festival (*Thronbesteigungsfest*). Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien*, 13–14, 213–14, 315–16. Variants on these theories followed: Weiser, *The Psalms*, 556–61. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 571. Wellhausen, *Die Kleinen Propheten*. Oesterley, *Ancient Hebrew Poems*, 373–74.

23. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2.