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'El: "God"

It would be difficult to find any name, human or divine, in the Old or the New Testament that does not have a special meaning. Furthermore, when one realizes how carefully the Bible is written, he knows particularly that any name or description of Deity is pointedly significant. The following studies are an attempt to exhibit various Old Testament names and descriptions of Deity. God's own selection of names allows us to see the rich meaning in the names given to Him by His people. To study those names is to deepen one's appreciation of Deity.

The general designation for Deity in Hebrew is built on the noun root 'El, or 'Eloh. The "im" added to a Hebrew masculine singular noun makes it plural; thus we also encounter the word 'elohim. "The form of the noun is plural, but the referent is singular. This is sometimes called 'the plural of majesty.'"¹ The Old

¹C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 18, n2.

Testament always denotes that there is only one God and always condemns the idolatry of polytheism. Thus it is important to understand the designations of God built on this noun root.

'ELOHIM: "GOD"

The first Old Testament description of Deity is in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God [*'elohim*] created the heavens and the earth."

The Meaning of the Word "God"

A mistaken conception. Some have thought that the words "God" and "good" are related. Certainly, the words are quite similar in their English spellings. Adam Clarke's comment on Genesis 1:1 is that the Anglo-Saxon word "god" indicates both deity and goodness. When one is thinking of the God of the Bible, it is understandable how the word "God" might be equated with goodness, for the God of the Bible is the essence of goodness. "O taste and see," exclaimed David (Psalm 34:8), "that the LORD is good." Outside the Bible, the "gods" were not good. If the word "god" signifies goodness, then it is grossly misapplied when used of heathen deities. Uranus was said to have hated and imprisoned his own children. Stories tell how Jupiter overthrew his father to become "king of the gods." Pagan gods were depicted as ambitious, quarrelsome, and licentious.

However, the word which Moses employed in Genesis 1:1, *'elohim*, has no relation to the word which means "good." The word "good" is from the Hebrew word *tobh*, as found in Genesis 1:4: *'Elohim*, God, saw the light, that it was *tobh*, good. Though the English words "god" and "good" coincidentally have similar

letters, the Hebrew words from which the English words are derived have nothing in common.

The word "god" means an object of worship. The English dictionary traces the word "god" to a root meaning "to invoke, to worship"; a god, then, is an object of worship. Similarly, the most probable derivation of the word *'elohim* is the verb *'alah* (as seen in the Islam name "Allah"), which means "to go to and fro in fear." The word has come to mean "to worship."

The fright originally contained in the word "fear" disappeared in the feeling of awe and reverence toward the great worshipful Being, with the result that in context to say that one fears God is to say that one worships God. Moses wrote, "You shall fear only the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 6:13); but when Jesus quoted Moses' statement, He interpreted the word "fear" with its proper contextual meaning, saying, "You shall worship the Lord your God" (Matthew 4:10). Since the word "God" is derived from the word for "fear," *yare'*, and since the word "fear" was used in the sense of worship, the word "God" and the idea of worship are definitely related.²

The only worshipful Being. As used in Genesis 1:1, the word "God" refers not merely to a worshipful being, but to the only One to be worshiped. The exclusiveness of the special Deity referred to in Genesis 1:1 as the only Being to be worshiped was later written out in the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3). In the statement "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall

²Though the derivation of *'elohim* ("gods") points to an object of worship, the word came to be used also of angels (compare Psalm 8:5 and Hebrews 2:7), of human judges and rulers (Exodus 22:8, 9, 28; 1 Samuel 28:13), and of human beings (Psalm 82:6; John 10:34).

serve Him" (Deuteronomy 10:20), Jesus considered that the word "only" was understood. He supplied that which was implied, saying, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Matthew 4:10). Thus this first description of Deity in the Old Testament was designed to convey the impression in the reader's mind of the only Being in the universe worthy to be worshiped.

The Plurality of the Word *'Elohim*

In Moses' writing, the change from a singular to a plural word, such as from "god" to "gods," was not done by adding an "s." Plurals were made by adding "im"; the word *'elohim*, then, is a plural word.³ However, when the word *'elohim* refers to the one true and living God, translators render the plural Hebrew word by the singular English word "God." The context determines whether or not the one living God is referred to, as in Genesis 1:1. The context of Exodus 20:3 is different. There the same word *'elohim* appears, but the context shows that a plurality of deities is referred to: "You shall have no other gods [*'elohim*] besides Me."⁴

Why the Old Testament would use a plural word to describe one God has occasioned much discussion. Uninformed atheists happening on this bit of knowledge have been hasty to use it as "proof" of ancient polytheism, but no careful student of the Old Testament text has ever made such an allegation. The

³The singular word for "god," *'eloah*, is very rare in the Old Testament, occurring only 57 times, while the plural form *'elohim* occurs 2,570 times.

⁴In the KJV, the word "cherub" is given both the Hebrew and English plurals in Hebrews 9:5, "cherubims."

Creator spoken of in Genesis 1:1 is held forth in the Scriptures as "one" (Deuteronomy 6:4); besides Him "there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). In addition, the verb "created" in Genesis 1:1 is in the singular number in the Hebrew text, although it has a plural noun for its subject. This gives evidence in the well-written text that the plural noun refers to one Being, God.

It appears that, among the ancients, authority was implied by the use of plural forms. The plural form of the word "lord" is used to describe Joseph in Genesis 42:30. Plural forms were used to describe Pharaoh, and idolatrous people used plural forms to describe a single god. Such plurals do not indicate number, but honor and authority—a clear usage both in the Bible and out of it. Realizing this, one should not be surprised that a plural form is employed to describe the God of the universe. Other designations referring to God are also found in plural forms. This is true of the words translated "Lord" (Genesis 15:2), "Holy One" (Proverbs 9:10), "Creator" (Ecclesiastes 12:1), and "Maker" (Isaiah 54:5).

Precious is the doctrine of the Godhead. Definite reference to the Holy Spirit is made in Genesis 1:2, and indirect reference is made to Christ in Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7 (see John 1:1–3). However, so far as present information allows, no reference to the Godhead is intended by the use of the plural form *'elohim* in Genesis 1:1. Rather, the plural form indicates the dignity and honor belonging to the great Creator.

The Creating God

The first biblical description of Deity, *'Elohim*, is related to a word which, when meaning "to create," never has a human being for its subject: *bara'*. Man

can fashion, mold, and adjust things which God has created; but only God can create (see Isaiah 65:17; Amos 4:13). Man can make things, such as a table, if given the wood with which to begin, but “only God can make a tree.”

The creation of Genesis mentions no material with which God began. We read that God worked with material (“dust”) in fashioning the bodies of man (Genesis 2:7) and of animals (Genesis 2:19), but we do not know of anything that God worked with in bringing the dust of the earth into existence. Creation out of nothing is implied. He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast (see Psalm 33:6; Hebrews 11:3). That God performed both the acts of creating and making, or fashioning, is emphasized by His being called *Bore'*, “Creator” (Isaiah 40:28); *'Oseh*, “Maker” (Isaiah 54:5); and *Yotser*, “Molder or Fashioner” (“Maker”; Isaiah 45:11).

Elohim in Genesis 1:1 thus denotes a worshipful Being, the only worshipful Being, a Being of all dignity and honor and authority, a Being able to create worlds and man out of nothing. These depictions of God should fill our hearts with appreciation and make us want to show respect and adoration toward Him. “Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker” (Psalm 95:6).

HA'ELOHIM: “THE GOD”

Moses specified in Genesis 5:22 that Enoch walked with *Ha'elohim*, literally meaning “the God.” When the word “the” precedes the word “God” in the Hebrew text, the understood meaning is usually “the [one true and living] God.”

Before the first appearance of the word “the” pre-

ceding the word "God" in the Bible, references are made to Deity seventy-one times. Some good reason must exist for the insertion of the definite article in the seventy-second reference to God.

Idols, images, and other false gods were nonexistent at the beginning of creation, but idolatry came to be a widespread human failing. The fact that Moses was specific concerning which God Enoch served indicates that, by the time of Enoch, idolatry had become a recognized problem. In spite of what others were doing, the sacred penman paid tribute to Enoch's fidelity to the one true and living God. The significance of the definite article preceding the word "God," occurring as it does hundreds or thousands of years after Adam, weighs heavily against the idea that an alleged initial polytheism evolved into an eighth-century monotheism. Rather, it indicates an initial monotheism degenerating into polytheism.

Immediately after the first use of *Ha'elohim*, the phrase reappears in the next chapter of Genesis. In relating events during the days of Enoch's great-grandson Noah, Moses again employed the definite article before the word "God"—and apparently again with a heavy significance. The sons of *Ha'elohim*, men who refused to worship idols and who maintained loyalty to the only true God, themselves erred in another direction: They became polygamous. These men who had resisted popular impulses to worship many gods did not resist impulses to marry many wives. They violated God's teaching that a man should become one flesh with only one wife, and they became one flesh with many wives.

The carefully composed Hebrew text implies that monotheism preceded polytheism, and not the re-

verse. We find strong indication that Enoch remained true to the one living God when idolatry had become popular. Later, in the days of Noah, it appears that some who held to the true God in doctrine did not hold to Him in morality.

'EL 'ELYON: "GOD MOST HIGH"

We find another description of Deity in Genesis 14:18: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High [*'El 'Elyon*]."

Here, for the first time in the biblical text, Deity is described as *'El*. Probably, the original meaning is the "Strong One" or the "Powerful One." Because of God's strength, this word came to mean "God." We have already seen that the first Old Testament description of Deity, *'Elohim*, means the "Worshipful One." Now we encounter another Hebrew word, *'El*, which also refers to God, but with the denotation of strength.

In Genesis 14:18 we see coupled with *'El*, a descriptive name for God meaning "the Strong One," an added description of Deity: *'Elyon*. *'Elyon* is a term applied to that which is lofty, exalted, most high, supreme. Apparently, then, this Old Testament description of Deity calls attention to Him as the Strong One who is most exalted.

Though God dwells in a high and holy place (Isaiah 57:15; 66:1), Genesis 14:18 speaks of Him as we would refer to a national leader, a commander-in-chief. God is thus represented as having complete sovereignty.

The context where Deity is first described as *'El 'Elyon*, "God Most High," points to two specific areas over which the Strong One has complete sovereignty.

God is praised as the owner and possessor both of heaven and of earth. As Supreme Commander, He had been able, using only 318 citizens as soldiers, to rout the armies of four kings (Genesis 14:14–16).

Exactly the right description of Deity is used at precisely the right place. The Strong One was sovereign over His own property—heaven and earth, along with all of their tenants. He could not be frustrated or defeated by the force of four rebellious armies.

'EL SHADDAI: "GOD ALMIGHTY"

To Abram the Lord used another term for Himself which depicts His strength. In Genesis 17:1 this expression appears for the first time: *'El Shaddai*, "God Almighty."

That God described Himself as *Shaddai* has led to considerable difficulty, for apparently the word is derived from a verb meaning "to deal violently, to devastate, to ruin." However, the context of this first use of *Shaddai* shows nothing of violence or devastation—simply God's ability to do what He has said. In context, we see that *'El Shaddai* was able to give a son to a hundred-year-old father, able to make a barren and desolate (Isaiah 54:1) ninety-year-old wife a mother, and able to make nations from Abraham and Sarah. *'El Shaddai* promised, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you" (Genesis 17:6).

The word *Shaddai* unquestionably denotes strength and power, but apparently not always in the direction of devastation and ruin. The context of the initial use of the word in the sacred text lends credence to the translation usually given for it: "Almighty." No power is as great as God's. Every force under, in, or

above the earth must therefore be dependent upon, subservient to, and subject to the permission of the One who told Abram, "I am God Almighty."

Knowing God to be almighty, Abram could rest comfortably in any assurance *'El Shaddai* might give. Abram could know that such a God would fulfill His promise. Trusting, therefore, in the strength of God Almighty, a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist," Abraham "in hope against hope, believed so that he might become a father of many nations" (Romans 4:17, 18).

After many difficulties and after about two thousand years, the Lord, never forgetting but ever moving toward the fulfillment of His promise according to His own unsearchable counsel, made Abraham a father of many nations. Those who are Christ's, of whatever kin and blood, are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26–29). God has vindicated Himself as *'El Shaddai*, "God Almighty."

'EL 'OLAM: "THE EVERLASTING GOD"

As He is in strength, God is limitless in time. This is reflected in the name given to Him in Genesis 21:33: *'El 'Olam*, "the Everlasting God."

The word *'olam* comes from a verb meaning "to hide, to conceal." In principle, *'olam* can mean "a hidden time," "an indefinite time," or "an unlimited time." The context has to determine how unlimited an *'olam* time is.

Sometimes *'Olam* is Limited

Nearly always, the way the word *'olam* is used shows clearly what limitation is placed on the meaning. For example, in Numbers 10:8 trumpet blowing

by the Aaronic priests was by statute made *'olam* ("perpetual"; NASB). Since the time when that statute was declared, even the Aaronic priesthood has ceased to exist. Similarly, hand and foot washing in a laver before the holy place (Exodus 30:21) was commanded to be *'olam* (perpetual, forever); but the laver, the holy place, and the priests have been gone for centuries.

Likewise, both circumcision (Genesis 17:13; see also Galatians 6:15) and the Sabbath Day (Exodus 31:16; see also Colossians 2:16) were *'olam* (everlasting), as was Jonah's stay in the fish's stomach (Jonah 2:6). Sometimes, therefore, the text itself shows that an *'olam* occurrence may be short-termed.

No Limit Can Be Placed on God

Nowhere is any time limit placed on *'El 'Olam*, "Everlasting God." He is the One who inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15), the One who is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:1, 2), and the One who owns immortality (1 Timothy 6:16)! He is the everlasting Rock (Isaiah 26:4) and the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9).

No Limit Can Be Placed on God's Attributes

Just as God Himself is timeless, so no limitation is set on His *'olam* (everlasting) attributes. His name (Exodus 3:15), His love (Jeremiah 31:3), His loving-kindness (Psalm 103:17), His glory (Psalm 104:31), His truth (Psalm 117:2), and His righteousness (Psalm 119:142) are forever.

No Limitation Can Be Placed on His Son

As is true with God the Father, so the goings forth of His Son have been from of old, from *'olam*—ever-

lasting (Micah 5:2). Jesus Christ Himself is called “Eternal Father” (Isaiah 9:6), of unending years (Hebrews 1:10–12). He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

The unlimited eternity belonging to Christ demonstrates that the Father / Son language is only illustrative, for a son cannot be as old as his father. Too, if Jesus were literally a son, according to human terms, a divine mother would be required. Though Mary was the mother of the physical Jesus, as the *Logos*, the Word who was God, He existed before Mary (John 1:1–3).

Necessarily, therefore, the Father / Son relationship must be taken as figurative. To speak of Christ as “eternally begotten” is contradictory; actually, the word “begotten” in English versions is a mistranslation.⁵ Further, if the Godhead is like a human family, the position held by the Holy Spirit in that family is unknown. Family language must therefore be kept in the area of illustrations, unless one would put a time limit on Christ.

No Limitation Can Be Placed on the Life Which God Bestows

Man’s life was limited when he was expelled from the Garden of Eden. He could no longer “take . . . from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). Jesus Christ, who lives forever without limitations, has restored man; He has given him access again to the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God (Revelation 2:7). Such life comes by one’s being

⁵*Monogenes* (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) literally is not “only begotten,” but “only one of a kind, a unique one.”

raised up at the last day (John 6:40). The eternal life which God has placed in His Son (1 John 5:11) is as eternal as the Son Himself—life undying (Luke 20:36; see John 3:16), incorruptible and immortal (Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:51–55).

No Limitation Can Be Placed on the Duration of Misery to the Disobedient

Tragic for some is that no limitations are placed on the duration of misery and punishment to those who are contentious and do not obey the truth (Romans 2:8). Just as a pleasant life with God in heaven is "eternal," so is the suffering with the devil and his angels in hell (Matthew 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–9). Human beings have presumed to put limits on the duration of hell, but not on the duration of heaven. However, the same Bible that teaches an unlimited heaven teaches an unlimited hell. If one takes literally the illustration of the wicked people being burned as stubble, leaving neither root nor branch (Malachi 4:1), then he is forced to reject the history of the rich man's suffering after death (Luke 16). Destruction of the body comes after death, but not the destruction of the soul. If one limits the time spent in hell, he at the same time limits heaven.

The Scriptures are clear that the word *'olam*, "everlasting," sometimes is used with contextual limitations. However, the Bible places no time limits on the existence of God, on Christ, on God's qualities, on the life He bestows, or on the punishment He is forced to inflict. When Abraham built an altar and dedicated it to the Everlasting God, he had faith that he, too, would become everlasting in a better country—that is, a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:14, 15).