

Gods Doomed to Death. Psalm 82 as a Testimony of the Birth of Monotheism

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines the beginnings of biblical monotheism. The author indicates the period of the Babylonian exile as the moment of the emergence of this idea in Israel. Psalm 82 is interpreted here as a testimony to the monotheistic transformation. The author advocates a literal understanding of the content of the psalm, as an image of the judgement over pagan gods, which ended in their condemnation to death. The reason for this dethronement of the entire pantheon is the permanent inability of the gods to ensure justice on earth. According to the psalmist, it is a feature of the only true God, which is the God of Israel, called upon to take power over the whole earth.

KEYWORDS: monotheism, justice, judgment of the gods, death of the gods

According to the biblical narrative, monotheism appeared in Israel's religion when YHWH revealed Himself on Mt. Sinai. Jan Assmann¹ even wrote about a revolutionary “Mosaic distinction” between truth and falsehoods in the religious sphere, and, consequently, about the dethronement of the Egyptian religion. According to him, “Moses’ reform” was an act that built Israel's identity and initiated a unique process of consolidating tradition. The breakthrough which Assmann wrote about was inextricably linked with monotheism, which, in turn, led people to question the existence of gods other than YHWH — the God of Israel. Since the time of publishing the monograph cited here, Assmann's thesis has been widely discussed among biblical scholars, cultural researchers, historians, and sociologists.² Monotheism itself, considered by him as progressive, was accused of intolerance towards other religions. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the idea of monotheism is connected to the tradition of the exodus, which, in turn, as the “founding myth” of the chosen people, was based on the ideas of freedom and truth.³

1 J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997) = *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (München: Hanser 1998; extended version, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 2000).

2 Cf. G. Schramm, *Pięć rozdroży w dziejach świata* [Five Crossroads in the History of the World] (trans. B. Baran) (Warszawa: PIW 2009) 45–74.

3 Cf. R. Achenbach – R. Ebach – J. Wöhrle (eds.), *Wege der Freiheit. Zur Entstehung und Theologie des Exodusbuches. Die Beiträge eines Symposiums zum 70. Geburtstag von Rainer Albertz* (ATANT 104; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag 2014).

Although the process of maturing towards the adoption of monotheism could have had its intermediate stages (henotheism, monolatry),⁴ monotheism itself, in its pure form, only appeared in Israel's religion at the end of the Babylonian exile (6th century BC).⁵ In accordance with common opinion, this article indicates this period as the proper time of its birth. Psalm 82 is a unique testimony to this crucial moment in the history of Israel's religion. In the background of the problem addressed therein, a clear crisis of the world order is found, as seen through the eyes of the inhabitants of Judea. Its cause was, in turn, the religious and social crisis caused by a perceived lack of the rule of law, for which the gods took the brunt of responsibility, followed by the rulers who represented them and the nations they ruled. The effect of this sense of ubiquitous injustice, in conjunction with the dynamic changes taking place on the international stage, was such that people started questioning the need for the existence of these deities, as well as their role; with monotheism⁶ being its consequence.

For the psalmist, the satirical "*short story*"⁷ of the Canaanite religions, which represented pagan religions as a whole, became a vivid background allowing him to illustrate the revolutionary change in religious beliefs among the people of ancient Israel. The biblical author presents the readers with a drama which takes place on a global scale (v. 5c: all the foundations of the earth are shaken), and for which he holds foreign gods responsible. According to him, the only logical solution is to cast them off the world stage and annihilate them. They would then be replaced by the God of Israel, who has been and remains the only God of all peoples on earth — a god capable of ensuring justice. What influenced this way of thinking and the monotheistic declaration of faith made here? We try to find the answer to this question in the article below.

4 On the concepts used in the discussion of phenomena and processes leading to monotheism, cf. A. Berlejung, "Die Begriffe Monotheismus, Polytheismus, Monolatrie, Henotheismus, Polyjehwismus," *Grundinformation Altes Testament* (ed. J.C. Gertz) (UTB 2745; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006; 4 ed. 2010) 69–70.

5 H. Vorländer, "Der Monotheismus Israels als Antwort auf die Krise des Exils," *Der einzige Gott. Die Geburt des biblischen Monotheismus* (ed. B. Lang) (München: Kösel 1981) 84–113; R. Gnuse, "The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel. Survey of Recent Scholarship," *Religion* 29 (1999) 315–336, <https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1999.0198> [access: 14.02.2021]; C.A. Rollston, "The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence," *SCJ* 6 (2003) 95–115, <https://www.academia.edu/474501> [access: 14.02.2021]; B.D. Sommer, "Monotheismus und Polytheismus in Ancient Israel [Appendix]," B.D. Sommer, B.D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: University Press 2009) 145–174; A. Mandell – J. Smoak, "Space, Things, and the Body. The Material Turn in the Study of Israelite Religions," *JHebS* 19/5 (2019) 1–42, <https://academia.edu/41349280> [access: 13.02.2021]. Cf. also H.-P. Müller, "Monotheismus und Polytheismus. II: Altes Testament," *RGG V*, 1459–1461.

6 K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1996) 325.

7 O. Loretz, "Psalmenstudien III. Eine kanaanäische *short story*: Psalm 82," *UF* 3 (1971) 113–115.

1. General Remarks on the Difficulties Associated with the Interpretation of Ps 82

As has already been mentioned, Psalm 82 seems to be a unique testimony to the causes and the timing of the definitive transition from polytheism to monotheism in the religion of ancient Israel. The psalmist refers to one of the most important arguments in the polemic on the essence of divinity as understood by the ancient, Middle Eastern world, which was the requirement that gods ensure justice on earth. The uniqueness of this testimony does not stem from the fact that it is the only monotheistic text (cf. Deut 4:35.39; Isa 41:21-29; 45:5-6.14.18.21),⁸ but rather from the argumentation employed in it, which not only renders it the only such psalm in the entire⁹ psalter, but also the only instance in the entire Bible where the righteousness of monotheism is argued for in this way. The “event” depicted therein takes place during an assembly of the gods (a vision?). The main purpose of this meeting as well as its main subject is to issue God’s judgement of the other gods for failing to fulfil their task of ensuring justice on earth (hence the root *šp̄t*—“to judge” appears four times; vv. 1c.2a.3a.8a). Accusations are made (vv. 2-4); conclusions are drawn (v. 5) and the sentence is passed — the death penalty (vv. 6-7). The result, however, is the call for the judge and the accuser, in one person, to take over the tasks of the inept defendants, since all the nations of the earth now belong to Him (cf. Deut 32:8-9). It is not difficult to notice that the structure of the psalm with regard to the imagery is based on mythical ideas drawn from the religious and cultural environment of Israel. From them, the psalmist creates his own unique portrayal of how and why the God of Israel (here as *ʾēlohîm*) can and should be considered the only true God.

There is, however, a problem with this interpretation of the psalm, which results from the fact that we cannot be sure who the “gods” being judged here are; nor can we find out who is addressing whom. At the end, it is undoubtedly the person who speaks (v. 8). The voice of the narrator describing the events (v. 1) is likely also his voice. The subject in v. 5, however, is difficult to identify. It may be the voice of God Himself, as in the other verses (vv. 2-4, 6-7), but it could also be the voice of a purported “prophet” or simply an observer of the scene.

1.1. Mythological Context of Ps 82

Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger¹⁰ point to at least three references to mythical ideas which are reflected in the structure of the psalm. *The first* one is the Canaanite image of a hierarchical gathering of deities which forms a kind of throne council in heaven, with

8 More extensively on monotheism in the Book of So-Called Deutero-Isaiah, cf. Z. Malecki, *Monoteizm w Księdze Deuteroizajasza* (Kraków: WAM 1998).

9 H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen 60–150*, 6 ed. (BKAK 15/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1989) 735: “Ps 82 hat in Psalter einem so exzeptionellen Charakter, dass es unmöglich sein dürfte, in jeder Hinsicht befriedigende Erklärungen zu geben.”

10 F.-L. Hossfeld – E. Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100* (HThKAT; Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder 2000) 481.

a chairman sitting on a heavenly throne. This image was well known to biblical authors from the time of the monarchy (v. 1; cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:1-3; Job 1-2; Ps 29:10-11; 89:6-8). *The second* one is the conviction that the divine king assigns certain territories and the peoples inhabiting them to individual deities to look after and govern them (cf. Deut 32:8-9). Finally, *the third* one is the hierarchical (henotheistic) model of the pantheon, characteristic of the Middle East, in which, over time, one deity would gain the upper hand (Ashur in Assyria, Marduk in Babylonia, El and then Baal in Ugarit). The psalmist combines all these images and subjects them to his own concept of the judgement of the gods, described in a manner analogous to the course of earthly trials. The main character (judge and accuser) is YHWH—the God of Israel. In the psalm, He is referred to as *'Ēlôhîm* (v. 1a) so as to show the contrast between Him and the other *'ēlôhîm* who constitute the “*'ēl* assembly” (v. 1b) and “*sons of 'ēljôn*” (v. 6b). It is also the effect of the universalisation of the God of Israel (the Elohist editing of the Psalter). It is He who accuses other gods of having failed to ensure justice on earth. It goes as far as accusing them of being corrupt and keeping the side of the wicked. There can be only one sentence—to deprive them of their divine status and execute the death penalty (vv. 6-7). Thus, the God of Israel becomes the only rightful God on earth. Moreover, at the end of the psalm the *vox populi* calls upon Him to accept this function (v. 8).

The psalm clearly intertwines the heavenly and earthly spheres. The crucial events unfold in heaven. The main characters are God, the king, judge and accuser, as well as other gods who stand trial. The latter, however, are ascribed negative traits (corruption) and negligence (failing to enact justice), which have adverse consequences on earth. As a result of these gods' approach, the ones who benefit from their rule are the wicked (*rešā'îm*; vv. 2a.4b), and the ones who suffer are the weak (*dal*; vv. 3a.4a), orphans (*jātôm*), the oppressed (*'ānî*), the poor (*rās*) and the people in need (*'ēbjôn*) (vv. 3-4). Who are all these victims? By referring to the big picture of the socio-political situation, it can be inferred that it is not only about the poor in general, but also about all other socially vulnerable people, such as orphans or small-holder farmers who lose their cases in the courts when confronted with nobles. Such situations occurred frequently, both in the mid-eighth century BC (Amos, Isaiah, Micah) and later. In a broader sense, however, it may concern all the victims of injustice prevailing on earth. As in verse 5, the gravity of the situation is evaluated: the earth's foundations are shaking. The extent of the events here is therefore much broader than just the social problems in Israel itself. It is a violation of the created order, requiring the Divine Judge to intervene immediately, which also follows (vv. 6-7). The ritual described here reflects yet another image known to biblical authors: a ruler usurping divine authority is brought down to Sheol (v. 7; cf. Isa 14:3-21; Ezek 28:11-19).

As we have already noted, the psalmist uses images associated with them to carry out a kind of liturgical-judicial seizure of power by the only legitimate contender for divine dignity – the God of Israel.

1.2. The Problem with Dating Ps 82

Due to its Canaanite background, the psalm¹¹ was dated back to even the period before the rise of the monarchy.¹² With time, however, the opinions that began to prevail were: at the time of the end¹³ of the monarchy, during the Babylonian exile,¹⁴ or just after it.¹⁵ Some scholars have even suggested that the writing process of this psalm was longer.¹⁶ What reality, then, should we place Psalm 82 in?

It is one of the Asaphic psalms (cf. Ps 50:73-83). It is probable that they previously formed an independent collection associated with a group of temple singers associated with the name of Asaph. The Asaphites originated from the region of Ephraim. They arrived in Jerusalem during the times of Hezekiah or Josiah, and after their exile, they were granted access to service in the temple in Jerusalem. During this period, they are presented as temple cantors (1 Chr 6:24; Neh 12:46).¹⁷ Although, according to some scholars,¹⁸ there are no clear arguments for placing the psalm at a specific time or in a specific circumstance, its monotheistic nature linked to the criticism and eradication of other gods, and its connection to the monotheistic spirit of Deutero-Isaiah's expression and his concept of divinity (cf. Isa 41:21-24; 4:8-13; 46:1-2) imply that the most probable date of Psalm 82 is the time of the end of the exile,¹⁹ and taking into account the ideological connection to Dan 7, even the post-exilic period. Nevertheless, the stylistically "separate" character of v. 5 and the suspicions about the secondary origin of v. 4:8 may be an argument that the psalm may have had a later history as well and was only refined when used in the post-exilic liturgy.²⁰

1.3. Verse 5 and the Question of the Structure of Ps 82

The following can be clearly distinguished in the psalm: an accusation (vv. 2-4) and the judgement (vv. 6-7). The description of the scenery, the so-called *exposition* (v. 1) and the liturgical acclamation calling on the God of Israel to seize power over all peoples of the earth and to judge the earth (v. 8) constitute a frame (inclusion). In the first case (v. 1), the psalmist (or a prophet, as some would have it) takes the floor; in the second (v. 8), theo-

11 R.T. O'Callaghan, "A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82," *CBQ* 15 (1953) 311-314.

12 M. Dahood, *Psalms II. 51-100* (AB 17; New York: Doubleday 1968) 269 with reference to J.S. Ackerman, *An Exegetical Study of Ps 82* (Diss. Harvard University; 1966).

13 S. Terrien, *The Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2002) 591.

14 H.-W. Jügeling, *Der Tod der Götter. Eine Untersuchung zu Psalm 82* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1969) 78-80.

15 Z. Rokay, "Vom Stadttor zu den Verhöfen," *ZKT* 116 (1996) 457-463.

16 Loretz, "Psalmenstudien," 268-273

17 H.P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph* (SBL.DS 88; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1988) 193-197; D.G. Firth, "Asaph and Sons of Korah," *Dictionary of the Old Testament. Wisdom, Poetry & Writing* (eds. T. Longman III - P. Enns) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic - Nothingam: InterVarsity 2008) 24-25; W.M. Stabryła, "Asafici - śpiewacy świątynni doby powygnaniowej," *StPast* 12 (2016) 121-130.

18 A.P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms. II. 42-89* (KEL; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic 2013) 719.

19 M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas, TX: Word Books 1990) 333; Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 325; Hossfeld - Zenger, *Psalmen*, 485.

20 Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 325.

retically, the same voice may be speaking, a community celebrating the cult of dethroning foreign gods, or the peoples of the earth. The subject in verse 5 – as already mentioned – is more difficult to identify. Here, the style of speech changes and the speech directed to “gods” is replaced by a statement about “gods.” If we single out this voice as the words spoken by the observers of the judgement scene or the alleged prophet, then verse 5 could be a turning point. This is also how Marvin E. Tate places it in his proposal of a chiasmic structure in the psalm.²¹ In fact, the words that echo in this poem seem to be an observation that the “gods” did not understand the admonition from the preceding verses (vv. 2-4) and now punishment must inevitably follow (vv. 6-7).²² However, if we treat the statement in verse 5 as a continuation of the accuser’s (God’s) speech, the content of the poem appears more as a final act of accusation resulting from the lack of improvement, which will be supported by the community taking part in the ritual (or its representative) (v. 8).

1.4. The Problem with Defining the Literary Genre of Ps 82

The genre classification of Psalm 82 has long caused problems for researchers. Sigmunt Mowinckel considered this text a combination of a psalm and a prophetic oracle.²³ Its prophetic character has also been noted by many other researchers who often write about the so-called temple prophets.²⁴ Marvin E. Tate²⁵ believes that it is at least a literary composition dependent on prophetic preaching (such as 1 Kgs 22). Allen Ross,²⁶ even treats the purported “oracle” (vv. 2-4.7) as “the heart of the psalm,” interpreting the scene of the judgement and condemnation (of the judges!) by God in the same spirit as in Psalm 50 (the Psalm of Asaph). In fact, the description of the scenery from v. 1 brings to mind the prophetic privilege of participating in a gathering of the gods (cf. Isa 6:1-9; 1 Kgs 22:19-23). Nevertheless, the issue of the so-called cultic prophets is a subject of debate today,²⁷ and there is no unequivocal statement in the psalm itself to suggest that it is a prophetic vision. The psalm can also be classified as a type of *rib* – a (pre-)judicial dispute, a form so often used in prophetic texts (Hos 2:4-25; cf. also Ps 50–51) or — which seems to be the most

21 Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 334. Likewise, G. Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi. Commento e attualizzazione*. II. 51–100 (Bologna: Dehoniane 1985) 717.

22 The lack of introduction to this direct response is typical of the Asaph psalms (cf. Ps 75); cf. Hossfeld–Zenger, *Psalmen*, 485.

23 S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas) (New York: Abington Press 1967) II, 64. However, the precursor of this way of looking at Ps 82 was Herman Gunkel (*Die Psalmen* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1892; 6 ed. 1986] 361). Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 713, regards this way of interpreting the psalm as erroneous.

24 J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit Israels* (WMANT 35; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1970) 120–125; Kraus, *Psalmen 60–150*, 735: “Kultprophetische Gericht” close to “Kultprophetische Klageliturgie.”

25 Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 333.

26 Ross, *A Commentary*, 716–717.

27 On this subject J. Lemański, “*Niech przyjdzie do mnie, a dowie się, że jest prorok w Izraelu*” (2Krl 5,8b). *Wprowadzenie do profetyzmu starotestamentalnego*. I. *Profetyzm przedklasyczny*. *Prorocy więksi* (Studia i Rozprawy 28; Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe US 2011) 52–53.

logical solution here — as a psalm imitating the course of a court hearing.²⁸ Rather, the purpose of the prophetic *riḅ* was to avoid a trial in court (cf. Ps 51). Daniel McClellan²⁹ classifies Ps 82 as a “psalm of complaint,” but John Goldingay only writes about a “distinctive form of prayer psalm.”³⁰ However, only the last verse is of a prayer character. The court hearing theme is present here clearly enough to be seen as an imitation of a court hearing culminating in an acclamative petition.

2. Ps 82 as a Scene of Judgment Over Pagan Gods

The way in which the psalm is interpreted – as we have already noted – depends primarily on the identification of *’ēlohîm* from vv. 1.6. A detailed discussion of this issue will follow in a moment. At this point, however, a problem must be noted, since in the case of Ps 82, three possible interpretations are proposed.³¹

The first one places the psalm on the religious and historical level. The demise of the gods is announced here, proving their permanent inability to ensure justice on earth. Consequently, YHWH remains the only true God on the scene — the God of Israel. The *lexem ba’adat-’el* is a technical phrase with Canaanite roots. In the texts from Ugarit, El, the father of the gods, was the chairman of such an assembly; although with time a prominent role (deserving of the “king” title) began to be played by the younger god – Baal. The proponents of the literal understanding of the word *’ēlohîm* (vv. 2b.6a) perceive the psalm as a poetic court ritual leading to the dethronement of pagan gods in favour of the one true God, which is the God of Israel (v. 8).

The second interpretation identifies *’ēlohîm* as the term for human authorities who exercise any office in the name of God (judges, rulers) (cf. Ps 58:2). The main argument here is the description of social injustice (vv. 2-4), which fits well with the “social criticism” known from prophetic texts and from the set of requirements established by the law exercising judicial power (Exod 23:1-9; Deut 16:18-19). Proponents of this interpretation also refer to texts such as Isa 1:17; 3:13-15; Mic 3:9-12.³² The second group of texts which, in the opinion of the supporters of such an interpretation, allow for the identification of *’ēlohîm* with “judges,” are on the one hand the regulations of Exod 21:6; 22:7, and on the other, such passages as Exod 18:13-27; Num 27:17; Deut 1:9-18; Josh 12:16-17.

²⁸ On various other proposals to define the literary genre of this psalm cf. Tate, *Psalms*, 332.

²⁹ D. McClellan, “The Gods-Complaint: Psalm 82 as a Psalm of Complaint,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137 (2018) 833–851.

³⁰ J. Goldingay, *Psalms. II. Psalms 42–89* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2007) 559.

³¹ Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 481–482.

³² A. Deissler, *Die Psalmen* (Welt der Bibel 1; Düsseldorf: Patmos 1964) 319–320; S. Łach – J. Łach, *Księga Psalmów* (PST 7/2; Poznań: Pallottinum 1990) 368–369; Ross, *A Commentary*, 721.

The third interpretation is an attempt to avoid a difficult choice.³³ According to this proposal, the Israelites of the monarchy period were polytheists like their neighbours; and YHWH was viewed in parallel to other gods around them. The mindset, back then, was such that the actions of the people mirrored the actions of the gods. Consequently, Psalm 82:2-4 is both a description of the actions of people and gods. As Canaanite officials, they were criticised and disavowed for their reprehensible attitude. In consequence, they were removed from their posts and executed just like their gods (v. 7a: *mw*) (v. 7b: *npl*). Thus, the psalm constitutes, on the one hand, a strong criticism of social relations in which the Canaanite officials and the religion that inspired them play a negative role. On the other hand, it is a voice spoken on behalf of the Yahwist religion. While such a picture would still fit the interpretation stemming from vv. 2-4, the verses 6-7, however, seem to render these proposals less plausible. The psalmist had the judgment of pagan gods before and by YHWH in mind. Indicating their uselessness in their performance of assigned tasks, their death sentence is deemed a polemic at the level of events taking place on earth (the political and religious background).³⁴ However, the consequences are also transcendent.

2.1. 'ēlôhîm: Gods or Judges? (v.1)

The image evoked by the psalmist is a specific vision of the divine tribunal — the “gathering of the gods.” It is derived from the Canaanite tradition of the hierarchy in the world of deities. In the texts from Ugarit, the pantheon was led by El — the creator and father of the gods. Gathered around him were other deities usually related to him (sons of El). They formed the “throne council” (cf. 1 Sam 22:6; 1 Kgs 22:19). The psalmist, however, can now only consider the text from Deut 32:8-9 (LXX version; 4QDeut^c) on which the mentioned Canaanite tradition was established. YHWH is presented in it as a ruler (the Ugaritic title of El — *‘eljôn* is identified here with him; cf. Ps 82:6) superior to other gods. He assigns them the task of taking care of the individual nations of the earth and leaves Israel under his exclusive jurisdiction. However, the intention is no longer to show YHWH in a similar role previously attributed to El.³⁵ The psalmist goes one step further. In Ps 82, the scene is clearly of a judicial nature, and YHWH is not in the position of a chairman among other gods. He is an absolute sovereign, which is clearly highlighted by the judgement passed over them (vv. 6-7). The God of Israel is the embodiment of (all) *‘ēlôhîm* and, as such, appears in the midst of the other *‘ēlôhîm*. However, he does so solely to accuse (vv. 2-4) and to judge them (vv. 6-7). This is not the role of a “chairman”³⁶ of the assembly (God is not a king sitting on a throne!), but of the accuser and judge.³⁷ This is suggested by the verb root *nšb* — “to

33 H. Niehr, “Götter oder Menschen – eine falsche Alternative. Bemerkungen zu Ps 82,” *ZAW* 99 (1987) 94–98, esp. 96–97

34 Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 483.

35 In the elohistic section of the Psalter *‘ēlôhîm* is synonymous with Jhwh; Tate, *Psalms*, 329.

36 Kraus, *Psalmen 60–150*, 736; L. Alonso Schökel – C. Carniti, *I Salmi* (Roma: Borla 1993) II, 145; Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 325.

37 Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 486.

stand up, to arise,” which means readiness to act (cf. v. 8: *qwm*). It describes the attitude of the accuser in the judicial context (cf. Isa 3:13).³⁸ The God of Israel is therefore among the accused, but acts as their accuser. The problem lies in the decision as to who is indeed the judge facing this assembly? Since the verb *nšb* means “become” or “arise,” then there are two principal interpretations. The first meaning would imply that the assembly is standing and God appears (cf. Gen 28:13; the angel of YHWH; Num 22:23.31), the other one would imply that God is already present therein and rises (Isa 3:13). It can be estimated that the content of the psalm shows that He is identical with the accuser. However, the judge usually has a sitting posture (cf. Exod 18:13; Judg 4:5; 1 Sam 20:5; then also 1 Kgs 7:7; Isa 16:5; 28:6; Ps 122:5; Prov 20:8). The same image of God sitting on the throne of judgement can also be found in Dan 7:9-14 (cf. also Zech 3:1-10). Therefore, the standing posture may mean that He has something important to say (cf. Amos 9:1-4), as in Joseph’s dream, where his sheaf rose and stood and the sheaves of the other brothers bowed to him. There, it signified his exaltation. Now, standing may denote not only the importance of what He is about to communicate³⁹ but also His readiness to act by seizing power over the entire earth. In fact, the verb analysed here often appears in the context of emotional tension as well as the expectation of an important event (cf. Gen 24:13.43; Judg 18:16; Isa 21:9; Amos 9:1). In the Pentateuch it is associated with extraordinary actions of God (Exod 15:8) or theophany (the text of Gen 28:13 was identified already). However, in prophetic and poetic texts, it is mainly associated with the activity of God Himself or someone acting under His auspices as an overseer or leader (cf. 1 Sam 19:20: nifal *participium*, as in the psalm analysed here). Thus, the psalmist may be describing the appearance of the God of Israel among other supposed gods. Despite that, He is not as much to take over the leadership (cf. Deut 32:8), as to act as an accuser in assessing their actions.

How should one understand the term “gods” then? The first and last use of the word *‘ēlohîm* (vv. 1a,8a), due to the use of singular verbs (v. 1a: *nšb*, *šp̄t*; v. 8a: *qwm*), allows for identifying them clearly as a designation of the one God who accuses other *‘ēlohîm* which are already understood collectively (cf. *bekereb* – “among”). But who are these other “gods”? The image of the “gathering of the gods” suggestively refers to the previously mentioned mythical notions. However, the content of Psalm 82 may also be compared to other psalms dealing with God’s judgement (e.g., Ps 58; 94). Apart from the judicial context itself, it does not have any close parallel in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Sam 22:11-23: Saul kills the priests of Nob). The allegations made immediately afterwards of the “gods” (vv. 2-4) are reminiscent of expectations towards earthly judges (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:16-17; 16:19).

In the Hebrew Bible and even more so in its social environment, the religious-cultural term *‘ēlohîm* refers not only to gods but generally to all other supernatural and “non-human” beings, such as: hostile cosmic monsters, demons, and dead kings, (CAT 1:113-13-26) or

38 H.J. Boecker, *Redeform des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament*, 2 ed. (WMANT 14; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1970) 85; P. Bovati, *Ristabilire la giustizia* (AnBib 110; Roma: PIB 1986) 212.

39 Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 335.

deceased people in general (cf. CAT 1:6 VI 48–49: *'ilm / mtm*; 1.6 VI 46–47: *rp'im/ilnim*; 1 Sam 28:13; Isa 8:19: *'ēlōhīm*).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, living rulers (e.g., Pharaoh) were periodically considered gods.⁴¹ This group even included divine statues (CAD I: 102–103 #7), stone stelae,⁴² and a number of other religious objects and places.⁴³

In the Old Testament, the word *'ēlōhīm* with a different understanding than one God essentially appears as a literally understood *pluralis*, referring to foreign/many gods, or to lower heavenly beings (cf. Ps 86:8; 95:3; 96:4-5; 97:7.9). The context of the psalm, as we have already noted, is Canaanite. The psalmist refers to the notions of the world of gods, known today mainly thanks to the texts from Ugarit. Thus we have before us the image of a “divine gathering” (*ba'adat- 'ēl; beqereb 'ēlōhīm*).⁴⁴ From the course of events and from the manner of description, as we have already noted, it follows that this time it does not refer to a throne council but to a judgement over these gods. The God of Israel will therefore appear in the assembly of *'ēlōhīm*, hitherto presided over by *'ēl*. It is not so much a takeover of his role and a kind of dethronement of the chairman, but – as the events described below will show – the total deprivation of all the divine members in this assembly of *raison d'être*. The moment YHWH is identified as the only true *'ēlōhīm*, all others must die (cf. Ps 95:3; 94:4-5; 97:7.9; then also Exod 15:11; Ps 8:6; 29:1; Job 1:6).⁴⁵ The phrase *ba'adat- 'ēl* is a well-established formula here (cf. Ugaritic *'dt 'ilm*) and in the Bible it basically refers to God's entourage.⁴⁶ The singular form of the noun *'ēl*, as we have already noted, may mean, however, that the biblical author is pointing here to the chairman of that congregation. On the other hand, the very notion of *'ēdā* in the Bible never means “gathering of the gods” around YHWH, either. When it appears in conjunction with the name YHWH, it only signifies the gathering of Israel (Num 27:17; 31:16; Josh 22:16-17; Ps 74:2).⁴⁷ In the descriptions of the heavenly “gathering” around the God of Israel, the noun *sōd* is used, although people, especially the prophets, could also participate in this group (Job 15:14; Ps 25:14; Jer 27:18.22; 23:1; Amos 3:7).⁴⁸ Over time, there was a semantic transformation and the noun began to denote a cult assembly.⁴⁹ So, was it really intended to ritually put

40 M.S. Smith, *The Origin of Biblical Monotheism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001) 6.

41 F. Abitz, *Pharao als Gott in den Unterweltbüchern des Neuen Reiches* (OBO 146; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag – Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1995) cf. also letters from el-Amarny: EA 141: 31–33; EA 185: 13–15. Iconographic examples cf. O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World. Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury Press 1978) 225–226, 263.

42 K. van der Toorn, “Worshipping Stones: On the Deification of Cult Symbols,” *JNES* 23 (1997) 1–14.

43 Smith, *The Origin*, 67–80.

44 E.T. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods. The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1980) 226–244; M.S. Heiser, *The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature* (Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison; 2004) <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu> [access: 26.02.2021].

45 Alonso Schökel – Carniti, *I Salmi*, 149.

46 Mullen, *The Assembly*, 230.

47 KBL, I, 739; later also H.D. Preuss, *Theologie des Alten Testament. I. JHWHs erwählendes und verpflichtendes Handeln* (Stuttgart – Berlin – Köln: Kohlhammer 1991) 60–61.

48 H.-J. Fabry, “sōd,” *TDOT* X, 171–178, esp. 174–175.

49 Fabry, “sōd,” 175–176.

other gods to death? After all, the picture may be an allegory of the judgement of judges. Some extra-biblical texts indicate that some gods were assigned judicial powers in the human world. However, the tools of their activity were always the people themselves. An example is furnished by the hymn to the sun god (Šamaš),⁵⁰ in which the deity is called upon to intervene in the case of dishonest judges. Similar calls are made to Marduk or Ištar.⁵¹ Thus, ultimately, these deities were represented by earthly rulers and judges.

According to some researchers,⁵² however, Ps 82 in its original wording had a literal meaning and was meant to be a monotheistic revolution. The idea was born in the Babylonian exile, when the chosen people had to face not only the consequences of the national defeat but had to ask whether the Babylonian gods were actually stronger than YHWH. When the exiles looked at the beautiful Babylonian temples and the statues of the gods worshipped in them, the answer could only be: yes. The biblical authors, however, argued against these conclusions. This results in beautiful monotheistic and, above all, anti-iconic texts from the so-called Deutero-Isaiah. One of them (Isa 41:21-29) even resembles Ps 82, although the polemic with the images of deities is more subtle there. On behalf of YHWH, Deutero-Isaiah conducts a dispute against the Babylonian gods, showing that they are closer to “idols” than to true gods. This fictional dispute, however, has ontological consequences later on. It constitutes evidence that these gods do not really exist. In this context, we can also read the message of Ps 82, in which they are judged not so much as worthless statues (thus, Deutero-Isaiah), but as useless ones on account of being ineffective in ensuring legal order on earth. Luis Alonso Schökel and Cecilia Carniti believe⁵³ that the psalm only later began to be read in a new context, as a judgement of human judges (a logical consequence of the non-existence of other gods). The targumic interpretation proceeded in this direction,⁵⁴ as did Kimchi, Aquila⁵⁵ and Jesus Himself (John 10:34-36),⁵⁶ followed then by the Church Fathers.⁵⁷ The change of identification did not change the content of the psalm.

In fact, the arguments invoked in support of the “juridical” function of “gods” in Ps 82 are often found in Exod 21:6; 22:7.8.10. Intercession “before God” in these cases, however, may mean not so much intercession before judges but visiting local sanctuaries. The second

⁵⁰ ANET, 387–389.

⁵¹ The texts quote Alonso Schökel – Carniti, *I Salmi*, 150.

⁵² Alonso Schökel – Carniti, *I Salmi*, 149.

⁵³ Alonso Schökel – Carniti, *I Salmi*, 149.

⁵⁴ “in the assembly of the faithful...among the judges of truth”

⁵⁵ “in the assembly of the powerful” (Greek *en synagōgē(i) ischyron*); cf. R.B. Saleters, “Psalm 82,1 and the Septuaginta,” *ZAW* 103 (1991) 225–239.

⁵⁶ J.H. Neyrey, “I Said: You Are Gods’: Psalm 82.6 and John 10,” *JBL* 108 (1989) 647–663; later also J.A. Emerton, “The Interpretation of Psalm lxxii in John X,” *JTS* NS 11 (1960) 329–334; J.S. Ackerman, “The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John: John 10:34,” *HTR* 59 (1966) 186–191; W. Gary Philips, “An Apologetic Study of John 10:34-36,” *BSac* 146 (1989) 405–419.

⁵⁷ C. Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *JTS* NS 56 (2006) 59–72; C. Gers-Uphaus, *Sterbliche Götter – göttliche Menschen: Psalm 82 und seine frühchristlichen Deutungen* (SBS 240; Stuttgart: Katholische Bibelwerk 2019).

example may also involve the practice of the so-called trials by ordeal. Indeed, human administrators of justice were seen as representatives of God Himself (2 Chr 19:5-6). They represented Him but were not His substitutes, and like all those who acted in the name of the Most High, they had to give an account before God in the end (cf. Wis 6:1-11). Outside the Psalter, the term “gods” is never used of judges. Nevertheless, people acting on behalf of God are compared to Him (Exod 4:17; 7:1), although it is then stressed that this should be understood non-literally. According to Exod 18:15, the people came to Moses to ask God (cf. 1 Sam 2:27). Human judges are also accused of perverting justice (cf. 1 Sam 8:3; Isa 3:13-15). Finally, the king, as God’s anointed one, is called “God,” but was always chosen by the one God (cf. Ps 46:7-8). The problem, then, would not be the application of the word “gods” to people, but the attitude of the people themselves, who might have understood their authority too literally and started to think of themselves as superhumans (cf. Isa 14:13-21; Ezek 28:11-19; Dan 10).⁵⁸ Perhaps Dragoslava Santrac⁵⁹ is right that in the case of Ps 82 we are dealing with an “intentional poetic ambiguity” and behind the cover of imagery evoking Canaanite ideas about the world of gods, the psalmist, in actual fact, not only disavows these images but also criticises unfair human relations.

It should be remembered, however, that the text of the psalm clearly presents to the reader’s eyes a horizon wider than just judges in Israel / Judah. It is constituted by the geopolitical situation of the entire region of the fertile crescent from the turn of the 6th / 7th century BC. Behind it is the world of foreign religions and the lack of social justice sanctioned by them. The fall of Assyria and Babylonia must have made an impression on the followers of YHWH. Their initial doubts were therefore replaced by enthusiasm. Evidence of this change is the aforementioned Deutero-Isaiah, who, following in the footsteps of his historic namesake from the 8th century BC, presents YHWH as the Lord of history and additionally depicts Him as the only true God. In the same spirit, but at the same time in a more spectacular way, the psalmist proclaims the triumph of the one true God in the arena of world history through the scene of judgement over foreign deities. As a starting point, he uses an image that he knows well: the gathering around YHWH seated on the throne (1 Kgs 22:19-22; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Dan 7:9-10; 10:13.20-21). This time, however, the entourage around his throne is not the lower entities of God’s heavenly circle, but the gods themselves, degraded and doomed to be mortals.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly, however, it is not about the “gods” themselves, but about the simultaneous judgement on the evil nations for whom these gods stand (cf. Exod 12:12⁶¹; Deut 32:8-9; Dan 10).

⁵⁸ Ross, *A Commentary*, 718.

⁵⁹ D. Santrac, “God and ‘Gods’ – Poetic Ambiguity and Wordplay: A Proposal Towards a Better Understanding of Psalm 82,” *JATS* 27 (2016) 37–54.

⁶⁰ E.B. Smick, “Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms,” *WTJ* 44 (1982) 88–98.

⁶¹ Interestingly, when viewed from the perspective of Psalm 82, the text from the Book of Exodus 12:12 is classified as an element of a priestly elaboration. The statement is possibly inspired by the texts of the prophets from the time of exile (cf. Jer 43:8-13; Ezek 30:13-15.19).

2.2. Why Did the Gods Deserve to Be Judged? (v. 2-4)

“How long” (v. 2a: *‘ad-mātaj*) is the question that introduces the objection (cf. Exod 10:3; 16:28; Num 14:11,27),⁶² having the power of the imperative: “stop,” “cease.”⁶³ It allows a look back upon the actions of the accused so far, and at the same time offers a short perspective of this state of affairs in the future. Usually, it is a complaint to God about the current situation (Ps 74:10). However, this expression also expresses the protest of one person against another (Exod 10:7; 1 Sam 1:14; 2 Sam 2:26; 1 Kgs 18:21) or God’s protest against humans (Exod 10:3; Num 14:27; 1 Sam 16:1). So, here too it is possible that the words of protest may come from both humans and God. For there are no clear indications that it is God Himself who is speaking here. One can imagine that the words are addressed in God’s name by the prophet to the community to which he was sent (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Isa 6:8). However, most researchers believe that the subject here is the God of Israel.

The accusations were arranged to take the form of a chiasmus (villains: v. 2b.4b; weak and needy: v. 3a.4a), and the questions are rhetorical.⁶⁴ They are motivated by the already mentioned mythological belief that deities are meant to ensure order and justice in their territories.⁶⁵ However, as the questions posed here indicate, this is not the case. Instead of law, there is lawlessness, perversely proclaimed to be law (v. 2).⁶⁶ Later, we learn that the accused “judge unfairly” (*špt* Qal *imperfectum* 2nd person plural, masculine + *‘awel*) and show partiality towards the vicious / wrongdoers (cf. Lev 19:15,35). They literally “raise the face of evil doers” (*penê rešāim* + *ns’* Qal *imperfectum*, 2nd person plural, masculine). This phrasing refers to the course of the trial (cf. Deut 16:18-20). A lowered face is a sign of guilt and disturbed relationships,⁶⁷ and in the presented context, it is a bias in passing court sentences.⁶⁸ Thus, “lifting the face of evil doers” is justifying their actions in the majesty of the law and consequently destroying the rule of law and legitimising injustice. However, the phrase can also be viewed in a more general way and applied to broadly understood social relations or a court audience with the king (Gen 40:13,19). Going further, beyond the earthly socio-political conditions, the final recipients, however, are the “gods,” obliged to make sure that this is not the case.

The following verses (vv. 3-4) concern the future. They serve as an admonition and a call to change. They can therefore be read as if they were a reform instruction.⁶⁹ These are traditional Middle Eastern religious *topoi* about the role of deities in ensuring the rule

62 Bovati, *Ristabilire*, 173.

63 Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 335–336.

64 T. Lorenzin, *I Salmi* (Milano: Paoline 2000) 325.

65 For examples cf. Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 712–719.

66 Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 486.

67 On this topic W. Pikor, „Zbawienie – zmaganie o Boże oblicze na twarzy Kaina (Rdz 4,1-16) [Salvation – the Struggle for God’s Face on the Face of Cain, Gen 4:1-16]”, *VV1* (2002) 29–40.

68 Bovati, *Ristabilire*, 175. Cf. in Exod 22:21; 23:6; Deut 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Prov 23:10; 24:11; 31:8 and the prophetic texts Isa 1:17,23; 5:23; 10:1-2; 56:10-11; Jer 5:27-30; Ezek 22:27; Amos 2:6-8; 5:7; Mic 3:11.

69 Ross, *A Commentary*, 721.

of law.⁷⁰ Expectations of this kind (protection of the most vulnerable: orphans, widows, people marginalised in a given community) were usually assigned to one specific deity in the pantheon. The psalmist, on the other hand, portrays this as a fundamental feature of divinity.⁷¹ In other words, in his opinion, ensuring justice is a sign of being a “god.” However, Middle Eastern texts⁷² limit this requirement to the protection of *personae miserae*. The psalmist makes it a more holistic postulate calling for changes in the overall social and political relations.⁷³

The choice of words is well thought out here. It is about the broadest possible spectrum of people affected by injustice. Moreover, the classic patterns are broken. Instead of the correlation of “widow / orphan,” we have the correlation of “weak / orphan” (v. 3a: *dal – jātôm*) and the related verb “to judge (justly)” (*špt*: Qal *imperativus* 2nd person plural). Another group requiring justice (this time, the root *šdq* Hifil *imperativus* 2nd person plural) are the “oppressed” (*āni*) and “the poor” (*nāš*) (v. 3b) and again the “weak” (*dal*) and “needy” (*’ebjôn*) (v. 4a). Here, too, the customary pair *āni* (v. 3b) and *’ebjôn* (v. 4a) is “torn apart.” Instead, the psalmist creates other pairs. The last two are referred to by the verbs “save” (*pl̄* Hifil *imperativus* 2nd person plural, masculine) and “rescue” (*nšl* Hifil *imperativus* 2nd person plural, masculine) (v. 4). In the latter case, it is about rescue from the wrongdoers (*rešā’im*). The repetition of the word *dal* – “weak” gives an additional accent to this juxtaposition. The noun also includes the meaning of “thin” (Gen 41:19), “helpless” (Exod 30:15; 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 10:1), “powerless” (2 Sam 3:1) “irrelevant” (Jer 5:4).⁷⁴ It is not difficult to guess, then, that the psalmist has in mind an unjust socio-political system in which villains and the socially stronger have the advantage. He demands a change to save the helpless, the oppressed, the weak, the needy, and the poor (v. 4b). Here, the issue no longer lies in individual situations, but in a whole system based on injustice. Its victims are not only “the poor by birth” or orphans, but also craftsmen and farmers owning little land who become victims of oppression and exploitation (cf. Prov 10:15; 22:16; 28:15; Amos 2:27; 5:11; 8:6)⁷⁵ and also all who are socially helpless and suffering any kind of injustice. The gods allow for such a system to be in place, and the psalmist expresses his disapproval of it and demands a radical change on behalf of the God of Israel.

70 The prologue to the *Code of Hammurabi* is meaningful here. For its overview cf. M. Van de Mieroop, *King Hammurabi of Babylon* (trans. F. Tryl) (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie 2016) 145–161, 175–190.

71 It may refer to one of the basic Old Testament ideas describing the God of Israel, since his moral nature and justice are indicated through it; R.W.L. Moberly, “Justice and the Recognition of the True God: A Reading of Psalm 82,” *RB* 127/2 (2020) 215–236.

72 F.C. Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature,” *JNES* 21 (1962) 129–139.

73 Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 487.

74 KBL, I, 211.

75 Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 488.

2.3. The Judge's Conclusion or the Observer's Assessment? (v. 5)

As Beth Tanner writes⁷⁶: “words and grammar are clear here, interpretation is not.” There occurs a change from the second to the third person. Now, there occurs a shift from speaking “to” them to speaking “about” them. This may mean that the subject who speaks changes, but it does not have to. But who are “they”? Are they the gods or their subordinates? Maybe both? Who is the subject speaking here? Is it the psalmist? Observers of the trial? The liturgical assembly? Or maybe it is God Himself who is still speaking, because there are no signals to indicate any change of the speaker? The message of the statement clearly shows that, despite the accusations made earlier, there is no reaction from the “gods.” The psalmist seems to include a brief pause, allowing time for the accused to respond.⁷⁷ He does not receive any response, and he (he or the prosecutor himself) concludes the previous accusations in the form of a reflection preceding the verdict.⁷⁸ As we have noticed, it is not incidental examples but the overall attitude⁷⁹ which is the case here. Therefore, verse 5 summarises that the “gods” who have just been accused are incapable of changing the situation and fulfilling the tasks which are their duty based on their position. Consequently, the words spoken here sum up the previous accusation and contain the final assessment of “gods.” Nothing has changed, and nothing will change. They have neither knowledge (*lō' + jd'*) nor understanding (*lō' + bjn*) (v. 5a).⁸⁰ The juxtaposition of these two verbs is not accidental (cf. Job 42:3, Ps 92:7, Isa 1:3, 40:21, 44:18, Jer 4:22, Mic 4:12). Ancient trials, including those in Israel, did not end only with the verdict or the declaration of innocence; it was also required that the rationale of the trial winner be approved (Ps 51:6; then also Exod 9:27; Jos 7:19-20; Judg 10:10; 1 Sam 12:10; 15:24-30; 2 Sam 12:13; 1 Kgs 8:47). For this, however, it was necessary first to acknowledge one's own fault, and the gods accused a moment ago are not capable of this. Although the two verbs may be synonyms, the latter is concerned with knowledge acquired through using the senses (Job 23:5). It also describes a characteristic trait of the God of Israel, His ability to penetrate human hearts and recognise human thoughts (cf. 1 Chr 28:9; Ps 33:15; 139:1; Prov 24:12). The accused gods, however, lack the ability to acknowledge their faults and properly see the unfair reality. Moreover, they wander (*hlq* Hitpael) in the darkness (*baḥšēk*) (v. 5b). Walking the paths of God (cf. Gen 3: 8) is related to light and salvation (Job 29:3; Ps 27:1; Prov 2:13; Isa 9:1; 10:17; 59:9). Darkness is the opposite of light (Job 3:4-5; 17:12; 24:16; Eccl 2:13-14; Isa 45:7.19) and walking in it is synonymous with wrongdoing.

It is a description of their current condition and, at the same time, the lack of prospects for change. The negative *lō'* particle emphasises that this is a permanent situation, and

⁷⁶ N. de Claisé – R. Jacobson – B.L. Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge: Eerdmans 2014) 643.

⁷⁷ Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 362.

⁷⁸ M. Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–1970) 123–137, esp. 129.

⁷⁹ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 337.

⁸⁰ Both verbs can have a juridical sense (cf. Job 11:1; 32:9; Ps 139:2; 1 Kgs 3:9; as a reproach to the unworthy shepherds, cf. Isa 56:11). On the issue of the first of these verbs cf. Bovati, *Ristabilire*, 59, 69–70, 222–224.

the sequence *perfectum* + *imperfectum* presents both the perfect tense (*characteristic perfect*) and the progressive state (*progressive imperfect*).⁸¹ The darkness here probably results from the lack of light (e.g., the justice resulting from observance of the law (cf. Isa 59:9; Wis 18:4; light as an expression of justice cf. Ps 37:6; 97:11; 101:8; Job 38:12-13; Mal 3:20; Hos 6:5). Perhaps, the darkness stands for the chaos created by such a situation, or for the desire to hide one's sins and reject the light (cf. Wis 17). In any case, straying "gods" cause social turmoil on earth. The consequences here are cosmic since the social order is a part of the universal order. Thus, social injustice caused the order of all creation to be violated: "all the foundations of the earth were shaken"⁸² (v. 5c; cf. Ps 62:3; because of YHWH's anger cf. Ps 18:8; Isa 24:18). The psalmist probably refers to the "pillars" which are the foundations of the earth (mountains or their roots; cf. Job 38:4-6; Ps 75:4; 87:1b; Mic 6:2). In this situation, God can no longer remain idle. He is, in a way, compelled to intervene.⁸³ The unjust system, the religions sanctioning it, and the gods worshipped in them must therefore disappear for the universal, cosmic order to be restored.

2.4. The Correction of an Erroneous Opinion or a Discovery of the True God's Character? (vv. 6–7)

In vv. 6-7, the style of expression from verses 2–4 reoccurs. The accumulation of words with pharyngeal consonants is noticeable.⁸⁴ The accuser now takes the role of judge. His judgement is one of the most exceptional texts in the Hebrew Bible. The death of all gods is declared in it (v. 7). This sentence is preceded by a description of the original state. The problematic part, however, is the introduction: *'āni-'āmartî*. It could be translated literally as "I said..." (in The Millennium Bible) or "I say ..." (in The Bible of the Society of Saint Paul). Since Herman Gunkel's⁸⁵ times, some researchers have turned this declarative way of expression into the formula "I used to think ..." (Ger. *Ich dachte einst...*), which makes the first part of the statement more theoretical. The formula *'āni-'āmartî* (v. 6a) followed by the word *'ākēn* (v. 7a: "but"), however, primarily expresses an erroneous, earlier concept of something that changes upon observing someone else's actions (cf. Isa 49:4; Jer 3:19-20; Zeph 3:7; Job 37:7; Ps 31:23; 66:18-19). It must therefore be understood in the sense of: "I thought so previously, but now I think otherwise" (cf. Gen 20:4; Ruth 4:4).⁸⁶ Therefore, it refers to

81 Ross, *A Commentary*, 723.

82 The verb describes the activity of the legs (Ps 17:5; 38:17; 66:9; 94:18; 121:3), the regularity of which may be disturbed; hence the meaning "to stagger," "to sway"; cf. F.I. Anderson, "A Short Note on Psalm 82.5," *Bib* 50 (1969) 393–394.

83 J. Jeremias, "Die Erde 'wankt,' «Ihr Völker klatscht in die Hände». *Festschrift E. S. Gerstenberger* (eds. R. Kessler et al.) (Münster: LIT 1997) 166–180, esp. 173; then also R.S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated. A Reassessment of the Theme of "chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 341; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2005).

84 Lorenzin, *I Salmi*, 325.

85 Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 360–362.

86 Dahood, *Psalms II. 51–100*, 270; Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 489 in both cases indicating K. Budde, "Ps. 82,6f," *JBL* 40 (1921) 39–42. In their translation, respectively: "I had thought ... but ..."; "Ich erkläre hiermit ... jedoch ...". Marvin E. Tate (*Psalms 51–100*, 330) suggests translating "Indeed I said..."

new experiences and an *ex cathedra*⁸⁷ judgement delivered on that basis. If the God of Israel is the one speaking these words, is He being credited with this change of opinion? Bearing in mind the situation presented in Deut 32:8-9 (cf. version LXX; 4QDeut^c), we can find its correction in the present place. This original concept of “you are gods,” “sons of the most High” certainly alludes to this text. It speaks of “the most High” (= YHWH), who assigned individual peoples / countries to His sons to care for and rule over them. In this role, as results from the current statement, they did not rise to the challenge, and the evidence of this is the lack of law and order among the peoples under their authority (cf. vv. 3-4).⁸⁸ In the background of the psalm, however, the voice of the psalmist himself must also be considered. Initially, he may have been impressed by the foreign deities and their power.⁸⁹ However, now, the fascination with them is gone.

Only justice is immortal, as a sage of Israel will say later (Wis 1:15). A lack of justice therefore leads to death. The sentence itself, the death penalty, is not expressed here by one of the formulas typical of legal texts (*môt jāmût; môt jūmāt*).⁹⁰ The phrase *temūtūn* (*mut* Qal *imperfectum* 2nd person plural) rather resembles the formula in Num 16:29 (*jemutūn; mut* Qal *imperfectum* 3rd person plural), which refers to natural death (“they will die, and the fate of all people will fall upon them”), and even more so a statement from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:4).⁹¹ The emphatic formula (“if they sin, they die”) in the latter case appears only twice in Isa 22:14 and in Ps 82:7. The serpent in Eden, however, declares “you will certainly not die... (you will be) like God...” (Gen 3:4-5), which undoubtedly allows us to see the reversal of this situation declared by the serpent after the trial described in Ps 82. As *’ādām*, who wanted to be like God, finally heard that he was mortal (cf. Gen 3:19b), so now the “gods” hear that they will be like a human being (*ke’ādām*) and will die. Immortality⁹² was one of the privileges of the divine, even though the religions of the ancient Levant

87 Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 326.

88 B. Janowski, “Der göttliche Richter und seine Gerechtigkeit,” *Gerechtigkeit. Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen* (eds. J. Assmann – B. Janowski – M. Welker) (München: Fink 1998) 20–28, esp. 23.

89 This is suggested by Mitchell Dahood (*Psalms II. 51–100*, 270).

90 On this subject, cf. J. Lemański, “Prawo Pana doskonałe – krzepi życie” (*Ps 19,8a*). *Kilka refleksji na temat prawa i sprawiedliwości w Starym Testamencie* [The Law of the Lord Is Great – It Strengthens Life (Ps 19:8a). Some Reflections on the Essence of Law and Justice in the Old Testament] (Studia i Rozprawy 54; Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe US 2019) 165–166.

91 Alonso Schökel – Carniti, *I Salmi*, 148.

92 C.H. Gordon, “History of Religion in Psalm 82,” *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies. Essays in Honor of William Sanford La Sor* (ed. G.A. Tuttle) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1978) 129–131. Mitchell Dahood (*Psalms II. 51–100*, 270) indicates the figure of the semi-divine King Kirta (Keret) from an Ugaritic poem dedicated to him. Cf. A. Tronina, “Eposy ugaryckie o Kerecie i Akhacie [Ugaritic Epics on Keret and Akhat],” *Ewangelia o Królestwie* (ed. A. Paciorek) (Scriptura Lumen. Biblia i jej oddziaływanie 1; Tarnów: Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2009) 563–621, esp. 586–587, 589. Better examples are given by Marvin E. Tate (*Psalms 51–100*, 337) pointing among others to the god Kingu being put to death for leading a rebellion (*Enuma eliś* 4,119-128); cf. J. Bromski (trans.), *Enuma eliś czyli opowieść starobabilońska o powstaniu świata* [Enuma Eliś That Is the Old Babylonian Tale about the Creation of the World] (Wrocław: Bagiński 1998; reprint of the Warszawa 1925 edition) 75.

and Mesopotamia know some exceptions. Death, by the verdict of gods, was ascribed to human nature.⁹³

But now all “gods” – except one – are to become “like men” (v. 7a: *ke’ādām*) and die; fall (*npl* Qal *imperfectum* with volitive *be*) as “one of the princes” (v. 7b). The latter case probably refers to a synonym of an office (royal official, commander, district administrator, etc.).⁹⁴ In relation to “gods” this means that they will lose their former functions. Nevertheless, these types of words (“die,” “fall”) often describe violent death (1 Sam 4:10; 14:13)⁹⁵ and fall (to Sheol) of earthly tyrants with divine aspirations (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:1-10).⁹⁶

Perhaps it is indeed a manifesto declaring not so much the death of the gods as of the whole system of polytheistic ideas about the divine world.⁹⁷ In fact, the psalm mentions two ways of looking at the divine reality, the former (v. 6) and the latter (v. 7). The culmination of this demythologisation process is the final liturgical acclamation (v. 8).⁹⁸ This is a peculiar way of saying to the polytheistic world: I believe in one true God.⁹⁹ Mark S. Smith¹⁰⁰ believes that, in contrast to the tendencies noticeable in Mesopotamia, where – as he writes – the so-called “summodeism,” or “the concept of one god [is understood] as the sum and summit of the reality represented by other deities,” Israel rejected all such compromises (Smith refers to those as “translation”), opting for pure monotheism.

2.5. Acclamation: the God of Israel as the Only True God (v. 8)

What is meant here is not so much a request as an acclamation stating that the God of Israel is the only true God. Nevertheless, the psalmist or liturgical assembly (*vox populi*) invites Him (*imperativus* forms with volitional *be*) to “arise” (*qûmâ*; cf. Ps 3:2), to judge (*šāptâ*) the earth; that is, to begin to act by changing the present situation. This call to assume the role of corrupt gods is justified (*kî-’attâ*) by the fact that (now, after judging the gods) He takes as an inheritance (“takes into possession”; *nhl* Qal *imperfectum* 2nd person singular, masculine) all the nations of the earth. Undoubtedly, such a conviction stems from the experience of the Exodus (cf. Ps 81:11). Like at that time in relation to Israel, so now to all peoples of the earth, the God of Israel appears as the saviour from oppression and injustice. Thus, the psalmist summarises and updates this historical experience of his people and per-

93 Cf. *Gilgamesh* X.320-322; A. Tronina, *Epos o Gilgameszu* [Epic of Gilgamesh] (TSPSM 2; Kraków – Mogilany: Enigma Press 2017) 102.

94 H. Niehr, “šar,” *TDOT* XIV, 190–215.

95 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 567.

96 Dahood, *Psalms II. 51–100*, 270.

97 Tsevat, “God” 123–137, esp. 129–130. Cf. also M.S. Smith, *God in Translation. Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (FAT 57; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008) 131–139; Peter Machinist, “How Gods Die. Biblical and Otherwise: A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring,” *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2011) 189–240; J.M. Trotter, “Death of the *’lhm* in Psalm 82,” *JBL* 131 (2012) 221–239.

98 Tsevat, “God,” 134. Next also S.B. Parker, “The Beginning of the Reign of God: Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy,” *RB* 102 (1995) 532–559.

99 Lorenzin, *I Salmi*, 326.

100 Smith, *God in Translation*, 169.

haps of himself in exile, encountering other religions (after 722 BC and even more so after 597/87 BC).¹⁰¹ The return from exile, preceded by the collapse of great empires, seems to be the decisive argument for such a declaration and at the same time constitutes the answer to the question posed by the pagans: “Where is their God?” (Ps 79:10). YHWH is no longer the chairman of the “gathering of the gods”; He is the only true God on earth. Although the verb “to judge” (*špt*), which is key to the entire psalm, returns, the main idea is not that God should judge the earth. What is really at stake here is that God should begin ruling this earth in a way that the fallen gods did not. For the time being, He stands in the midst of these fallen deities, and the supplicant calls upon Him to act (cf. Ps 44:27; 74:22; 76:9-10). Here, God is supposed not only to take the portion/inheritance (*nhl*) of Israel as his own (cf. Exod 34:9; Deut 32:9; Prov 2:12-16), but also take into possession all other nations.¹⁰² In this way, they will no longer be subject to their patron deities (cf. Deut 32:8-9; then also: Jer 10:14; 51:17-19; Dan 10:13.20-21) and will become the property of the one true God – the God of Israel (cf. Deut 4:19-20; Jer 16:19-20).

3. Sitz im Leben of Ps 82: The Challenge of the Babylonian Exile

There is no doubt that the Babylonian exile was the best time to gain experience that would allow for the process of annihilating the entire ancient pantheon. The fall of the kingdom of Judah (587 B.C.) triggered a massive socio-religious crisis. After the temporary enthusiasm of Josiah’s time (especially between 629–609 B.C.), when the Assyrian empire collapsed and there was hope of “rebuilding” a unified monarchy (Josiah was portrayed as “the second David”), a mighty blow came from recent allies, the Babylonians. The kingdom of Judah, first subordinated to the new empire (after 597 B.C.) and then destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (587 B.C.), ceased to exist. The elites were deported. Feelings of disappointment, bitterness and loss of hope (cf. Ps 137; Ezek 37:11) dominated, resulting in the conviction of breaking the covenant with God, and in the belief in the power of foreign deities. There was a temptation to abandon Yahwism. The latter tendency was undoubtedly supported by the splendour of the Mesopotamian temples and the ancient cultural heritage of Mesopotamia. Such deities as Ishtar, Shamash and the Egyptian Amon were associated with justice by their followers. For Israel, however, the nations that worshipped them were associated with injustice and oppression. This is also how the deities themselves were perceived. It was YHWH – the God of Israel, who ultimately revealed Himself as the saviour of the oppressed, which would be marked by the fall of another empire (formerly Assyria, now Babylonia). So, it is He who will also ultimately prove to be the one true God and He will be given the right to pronounce the death of other deities. As Gianfranco

¹⁰¹ Hossfeld – Zenger, *Psalmen*, 490.

¹⁰² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 568.

Ravasi wrote,¹⁰³ Semitic psycholinguistics could not confess monotheism except by declaring the total superiority of the one God over others (cf. Ps 29:1b-2; 95:3; 97:9; then also Exod 15:11; 1 Kgs 22:19) and we also find a reflection of this way of thinking in Ps 82.

Therefore, the psalmist takes up the new challenge of the experience of the Babylonian exile, presenting his definition of the true God on its canvas. He builds it on the basis of the requirement of justice for the poor and the deprived of social rights. Although we do not have sufficient data to precisely date the psalm, the knowledge of Deut. 32:8-9 and the clearly monotheistic tone of the verses, despite their polytheistic background, allow us to place Psalm 82 in the context of emerging monotheism, i.e. at the turn of the end of the exile and the beginning of the so-called Second Temple era. The text classified today as post-exilic, like Joshua 24, set in the context of the covenant renewed in Shechem, provides the time setting for a clear call to make a choice between the formerly worshipped gods and the God who saved Israel, with the preferred option to choose the latter, of course. Ps 82 provides a concise argument in favour of this choice. It was not (foreign) gods but the God of Israel who proved to be the saviour of the oppressed.

Understood too literally, Ps 82 could over time arouse resistance on the part of adherents of radical monotheism and we can find therein the roots of the later, interpretative transformation of “gods” into “judges” (cf. Exod 4:16; 7:1; Num 11:17,25; 2 Sam 14:17; Ps 45:7), as evidenced by the already mentioned anthropological reappraisal made in the Targums, as well as by the interpretation made by Jesus (cf. John 10:34-36).

Conclusions

1. The primary factor that influenced the birth of monotheistic thinking among Israel's intellectual and spiritual elites was the experience of the Babylonian exile. First, there appeared a socio-political and spiritual crisis caused by the fall of the state, and then, along with the collapse of Babylon, came the sense of the triumph of Israel's God over the powers of this world. These events constituted a decisive impulse to re-evaluate the previous religious way of thinking.
2. The background of Psalm 82, in terms of imagery, is made up of reminiscences from the world of ancient Canaanite religious imagery. However, the psalmist uses these images only as poetic material, allowing him to visually present the reasons for his monotheistic beliefs.
3. Ps 82 is, alongside Deut 32:8-9 (version LXX; 4QDeut^j), to which the psalmist indirectly refers (v. 1: assembly; v. 6: the Most High), is a testimony of the transition process from polytheism and monolatry to monotheism.
4. The declaration of the inability of the “gods” to ensure justice on earth, and consequently of their uselessness and the death penalty imposed on them, is the central theme of

¹⁰³ Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi*, 712.

the psalm. Thus, the understanding of the word *'ēlōhīm* in the literal sense of alien, de-throned and annihilated gods (apart from vv. 1a,8a, where it is meant to define YHWH) is perfectly justified and constitutes the original meaning of the psalm.

5. Behind the judgement of “gods” there is also the already mentioned negative religious and social experience caused by the loss of the state and freedom (Babylonian exile). The scope of this experience is beyond the limits of the Judean community alone. It has a worldwide dimension (v. 5b). Hence, a second meaning of the psalm is also possible, in which the critique and the fall of *'ēlōhīm* can be applied to those responsible for ensuring social justice. Such an interpretation does not, however, blur the expressive power of the first meaning, which is an explicit monotheistic declaration, in which the effective assurance of justice on earth is a fundamental feature of divinity and a hallmark of the one true God.

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