

*When The Gods Meet: Psalm 82 and The Issue of Justice**

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In this psalm we enter a different world of thought from what one seems to encounter in most of the other psalms, though it has affinities with a number of other Old Testament texts. It is not a psalm that has been significant in the history of piety or worship. For Psalm 82 is one of the most overtly mythological texts in Scripture, which in its form and content seems to touch base hardly at all with anything familiar to most persons in the community of faith. There is no "I" or "we" uncovering the anguish of a troubled heart or lifting exultant praise to the glory of God. The psalm is not even set in the world we know. It has its setting in the divine council or the heavenly assembly,¹ a mythological motif common to the religious world of the ancient Near East, in which the gods gather together as a political or judicial assembly or on occasion as a military entourage, often, if not usually, under the direction or leadership of one of the high gods. In Psalm 82 one enters that world, encountering at the very beginning the heavenly assembly with the gods seated all about. The psalm looks as if it could have come straight out of Canaanite mythology. It has very little, if any point of contact with the contemporary reader of the psalms for whom the whole notion of a heavenly assembly or a council of the gods is only a mythopoeic way of speaking, an image that seems out of place in the modern world, even in the modern theological world where the most obvious demythologization of the notion of God has eliminated at the first stage the idea of god on a heavenly throne surrounded by other divine beings.

The fact, however, that we are dealing here with imagery and mythological form that would probably not be a vehicle for the expression of faith in contemporary theology does not mean that we cannot search for the intention of the ancient imagery of the Near East. For in such extended metaphors the people of Israel expressed some rather basic convictions about the God who had brought them into being and claimed their life. They used the thought forms, the language, the images that were given to them out of their environment, but they used them and transformed them in the service of a particular view of the intention and purpose of God in the human community, a view that in some way reaches its strongest expression in this psalm as it speaks about two of the foundation stones of the faith in Israel and indeed the whole Judeo-Christian tradition: monotheism and the place of justice in the human arena.

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Psalm 82 is, in effect, a brief dramatic scene in the affairs of the assembly of the gods. In this scene Elohim, God, stands up (v. 1) in the midst of the gods (*elohim*), and turning the divine council into a judicial court, proceeds to act as a judge *against the other gods*. Elohim first utters a series of indictments against the gods that are composed both of accusations about misconduct (v. 2) and commands that define and call for proper divine conduct (vv.3-4). The powerlessness or incompetence of these gods to carry out their responsibility for ensuring justice is described in v. 5 in language reminiscent of the description in Isaiah 40-55 of the nothingness of the idols that have no capacity to see or know or discern anything, and the earthshaking effect of this failure or incompetence is disclosed. The final act of judgment by Elohim is a sentence pronounced against all the other gods, which is to the effect that those who are gods shall die like mortals (v. 6), those who are eternally exalted in their divine status shall now be brought low, as is eventually the case with every human rule (v. 7). At the conclusion of the Psalm, the psalmist calls for Elohim, God, to rise up and judge the earth, claiming as an inheritance or permanent possession all the nations whose gods are now eliminated from the scene.

What does all this talk about the gods and the council of the gods have to do with monotheism? It seems strangely incongruous as an expression of faith of a people who claimed the Lord of Israel as God of the universe and worthy of the worship of all peoples. What in effect is happening, however, is that the issue of whether the universe is ruled by one or many, whether the ground of being is divided or whole, whether the object of ultimate human loyalty and devotion is single or divided, whether the human community is seen to be under the claim of one Lord or several, is being addressed head-on in these verses. With the image of the divine council, which is pervasive in the Old Testament and can hardly be expunged from that literature without significant damage and loss, Israel knew itself to be speaking about the divine governance of the world. With this psalm it makes for its time a radical statement that suggests a permanent shift in the way that issue is to be understood by the human community, a shift that has had enduring effect even though the polytheistic option still holds many adherents. Not even the central Christian revelation, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, altered that claim. Indeed Christian theology reasons and Christian faith confesses that Jesus of Nazareth merits the title of Lord and the absolute devotion of *all* human beings precisely because in this one is revealed the *one* God of all.²

Some have seen Psalm 82 as a stage in the development toward monotheism. In some ways that is what I am suggesting, but one must be hesitant about arguing any chronological step or assuming that after this psalm is created it is no longer possible to talk about the gods of the divine world. That is simply not the case. Israel lived in a world peopled with gods, and the revelatory mode of God always works its way in continuity with and out of the human modes of thinking and understanding even at the point of sharp discontinuity and disjunction.³ What happens here is that the divine world is rendered impotent and totally powerless before the God of Israel. We have here no other named deities. We have no battle among the gods (though remnants of that are present elsewhere in the Old Testament). The gods are nameless,

colorless, silent. Even the reference to them uses the same term — *elohim* — that is used for the God who totally overwhelms all other claims to deity, suggesting a kind of integration into Elohim of all *elohim* reality or claims to reality. Whatever this psalm refers to by way of “gods” has no autonomy or independence apart from Yahweh-Elohim, the Lord, the God of Israel.

In the midst of this assembly of the gods, the Lord rises and in explicit, and to my knowledge unprecedented, fashion condemns all the other deities to death. The condemning of one god to death by another god or group of gods, or mortal combat between individual gods or group of gods, is not uncommon in religious mythologies. But the claim that *one* deity renders *all other* deities *mortal* is another matter. While I assume it is not impossible that one might discover that motif sometime in the context of Near Eastern myth, it seems highly unlikely. Whether or not there are any analogies, the force of the mythopoeic act described in this psalm should not be missed. The whole divine world is rendered or asserted to be impotent. The psalm is the story of the death of the gods. The immortals are condemned to the fate of mortality and merit comparison with human beings and not God. In this sense the gods are clearly and permanently negated. Only the Lord of Israel can claim the just rule (which is the meaning of “judge the earth” in v. 8) of all the earth. Only God, Elohim, has any power in the divine realm. There is, therefore, a sense in which one can say that while the reader of this psalm enters the world of the gods at the beginning of the psalm, he or she has left it forever at the end of the psalm. The imagery of the divine council remains a part of the powerful language by which the Old Testament dramatically expresses the Lord’s rule and governance, but the life of the gods is at an end. Human worship has only one direction; human life has only one aim. Not only is divided loyalty in an ultimate sense no longer a part of the structure of the universe. It is, in Israel’s faith, which we inherit, now seen to be a problem to be overcome. To the extent that that happens, human life is made whole, no longer torn apart.

Of equal importance to the final outcome of the psalm is the particular impetus that brings about the negation of the divine world. The gods are condemned to death for their failure to carry out justice in the human realm, a justice that is particularly characterized by protecting and maintaining the right of the weak and powerless members of the community as represented especially in the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed—indeed those persons who on their own do not have the capacity to claim their own place and are vulnerable to those with wealth and power, those who can become the wicked as they oppress and overwhelm the weak for their own enhancement. The courts and the marketplace are first in view in God’s indictment of what is wrong and call for what is “right” (v. 3b), but all the structures of society small or large are in view when the issue of divine governance of the human realm is at stake.

How much does justice in human society matter? Israel never gave a clearer or more radical answer to that question, even in the strongest words of Amos and Jeremiah, Isaiah and Micah, than in this psalm. Justice is the cornerstone of the universe. The notion that justice matters was not a discovery of Israel’s religion. But the intensity and centrality of righteousness and justice are

a particular touchstone of that tradition, which has never been diminished. Justice in the *human* realm was a concern of all Near Eastern religions, but in Psalm 82 the *cosmic* realm also depends upon justice in the social order. Indeed the very foundations of cosmic order are shaken in the presence of injustice. The cosmos, the universe, the divine world, depends upon the maintenance of justice in the human community—not only in Israel's midst but in *all* communities. When justice is not maintained, then the very foundations of the earth are shaken, the world threatens to fall apart into chaos once more. That is how much justice matters. It is not just one of the virtues. It is not even a high ethical demand. Justice is the issue on which the very claims of deity are settled. Justice, just rule, is that central activity by which God is God. Without it the very universe cannot survive.

NOTES

¹ On this motif see E. T. Mullen, Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods; The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980).

² For some reflections on the centrality of the monotheistic claim in the Old Testament and its implications for human existence see my essay, "The Most Important Words: The Yoke of the Kingdom," *The Iliff Review* 41 (1984): 17-30.

³ See the elaboration of this point in my article "God and the Gods: History of Religion as an Approach and Context for Bible and Theology," *Affirmation* 1/5 (1973): 37-62.