

Reformed Theological Seminary- Charlotte

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תְּשִׁיחַת־אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָעָם  
To Whom May It Concern? The Mysterious Case of the

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A Paper

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by

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## Introduction

Psalm 82 brings the reader swiftly and dramatically into a scene of judgment. God's delegation of power to the אֱלֹהִים is augmented with God's unbounded jurisdiction over them in the בָּעֵדָת-אֱלֹהִים.<sup>1</sup> The crucial question Psalm 82 presents is not, is God the Supreme Judge of the אֱלֹהִים in the בָּעֵדָת-אֱלֹהִים, that is agreed upon by all, instead, the question is: who are the subjects in the בָּעֵדָת-אֱלֹהִים? In this paper we will deal primarily with the interpretation that these אֱלֹהִים are the national deities of Canaan. Within this view there are some who would claim that Psalm 82 is Asaph's mnemohistorical account of monotheistic orthodoxy in Israel transforming the dominant worldview in Canaan,<sup>2</sup> while others see this psalm as an Yahwistic adaptation of a Canaanite poem.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Currid, grant that the subjects are Canaanite deities, but view the psalm as polemical literature.<sup>4</sup> However, this paper will attempt to challenge the view that the subjects in this psalm are divine beings of any sort. Instead, this paper will argue that the central thrust of Psalm 82 is a cultic historiography of the Just Judge of *Israel* judging in the midst of the nation's rulers.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this will be articulated through a look at the contextual background to the Asaphite psalms and an exegetical examination of בָּעֵדָת-אֱלֹהִים. Lastly, we will analyze the whole of the psalm before making remarks on some of its theological implications for the modern day.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Book III-V of the Psalms* (Vol. 2; London, UK: InterVarsity, 1975), 296.

<sup>2</sup> Karl N. Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph: Mnemohistory and the Psalms of Asaph* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 187.

<sup>3</sup> Julian Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 14 (1939): 31-33.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Currid, *Against the gods: The Polemical Theology of the OT* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2013), 140. This is a much better and intriguing option.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, "judges" has been used instead of "rulers" in this interpretation, yet, we will use the word "rulers" due to its conceptual framework being somewhat more broad. "Rulers" captures more wholistically the governmental leadership in Israel, portraying more than just the judicial element.

## Translation of Psalm 82:1, 6-8

<sup>1</sup> A Psalm of Asaph.

God<sup>a</sup> stands<sup>b</sup> in the assembly<sup>c</sup> of God,<sup>d</sup> He judges gods in<sup>e</sup> its midst.<sup>f</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I said to myself,<sup>g</sup> “You are gods, and<sup>h</sup> all of you are sons of the Most High.”

<sup>7</sup> “But no!<sup>i</sup> As<sup>j</sup> men you shall die, and you shall fall like<sup>k</sup> any one of the princes!”

<sup>8</sup> Arise, O God! Judge the earth! For<sup>l</sup> You possess<sup>m</sup> all<sup>n</sup> nations.

### Textual Notes

<sup>a</sup> If one takes the Elohistic redaction view of this part of the Psalter then אלהים should be replaced with the Tetragrammaton and would thus be translated “Yahweh” or “The LORD.”<sup>6</sup> However, evidence for this is wanting.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>b</sup> Some English translations, such as the ESV, NASB, and the RSV have God taking His place at some point in the past (ESV, RSV) or taking His stand in the present (NASB). However, the verb עָשָׂה is a participle, which, in this poetic form, most likely brings the reader’s vision to God presently standing.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, translating the verb as “stands” connotes God’s firm and fixed posture in the בְּעֵדָה-אֵל.<sup>9</sup> It is as if God is always presiding as the Judge. Whereas, the translations of the ESV, RSV, and NASB possibly connote that God, at some point, was not in His place as Judge and has recently taken up His post, which is an unnecessary aspect to add to the translation. Kidner says the thrust of the Psalm is “continuous assessment” of judgment though dramatized as a single scene.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>c</sup> Many use the term “council” here.<sup>11</sup> However, Kidner’s assessment that “council” is problematic has significant weight. While the term is used in other places in Scripture in the context of God sharing His thoughts with His servants, here, the subjects are not equal, or even subordinate, partners with God in debate. Instead, the subjects are present to be judged.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (trans. by Hilton C. Oswald; CCS; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 153-54.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Vol. 20; WBC; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 329.

<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalter* (Vol 3; JSOTSS 233; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield, 1996), 159; Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 186; Kraus, *Psalms*, 153; KJV; all translate the verb simply as “stands.” Tate translates the verb, “is standing,” which is virtually synonymous with “stands,” making it another good option. Tate, *Psalms*, 328.

<sup>10</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 2:51-100* (AB 17; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 268; Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 186; Harry P. Nasuti, *Tradition and the Psalms of Asaph* (SBLDS 88; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988), 108; Tate, *Psalms*, 329; ESV; RSV.

<sup>12</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 297-98. Tate is especially not sold on Kidner’s caution against “council.” He argues that the only difference between “council” and “assembly” is semantical and of minute importance. However, he does settle with the translation of “assembly.”

Further, the LXX reads, ἐν συναγωγῇ, affirming the translation of “assembly,” or possibly, “congregation,” but not “council.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>d</sup> The LXX reads, θεῶν, which is genitive plural. The Vulgate follows the genitive plural translation, reading *deorum*, yet, the VULX reads, *Dei*, which is genitive singular, providing some confusion.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I am following Delitzsch’s translation here. The reasons are two-fold. First, God is introduced in a manner of prophetic judgment, and secondly, I take פָּעֵדָה to refer to “the assembly (of the sons of Israel),” making this God’s special assembly and not a “divine” assembly.<sup>15</sup> Examples of this include, Num 27:17; 31:16 and Josh 22:16, though with יהוה instead of אלה.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>e</sup> The בְּ preposition is employed in a spatial sense, connoting “in the domain of,” that is, inclusion within a group. Another appropriate translation would be “among.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>f</sup> Calvin states that it is not evident whether this should be, “He will judge in the midst of the gods” or “He will judge the gods in the midst.”<sup>18</sup> However, translating the imperfect, טָבַשׁ, as a non-completed present action<sup>19</sup> fits with God’s continual standing in the assembly. Though His judgment may be delayed, He still is perpetually Judge.

<sup>g</sup> Kraus, “I thought,” and Dahood, “I had thought,” both indicate the same reflexive idea.<sup>20</sup> Tate, however, is not sold on this conjunction’s reflexivity, and thinks it better to retain the idea of God’s recall of a definitive statement He made in the past.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>h</sup> This is a conjunctive use of the waw-conjunction. Some translations (ESV; NIV) do not even include the word, “and,” opting for a comma instead. Either way the idea is to show the interrelatedness of “gods” and “sons of the Most High.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>i</sup> The adverb אכן is most commonly taken as “surely/truly/nevertheless,” in order to express a sudden, unexpected contrast.<sup>23</sup> Goldbaun says that the adverb means “Ah!” which is a “grunt substitute.”<sup>24</sup> The translation, “But no!,” provides a more adversative force between “gods” (v. 6) and “men” (v. 7) than “nevertheless” (ESV; NASB; RSV), though the same contrasting force is present in both translations.

<sup>13</sup> See also Koehler and Baumgartner, “הַעֲדָה,” HALOT 2:789-90.

<sup>14</sup> Tate believes that the LXX represents a variant Hebrew textual tradition where *Elohim* was used. Tate, *Psalms*, 329.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes argues for this in Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms* (ed. by Robert Frew; Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1964), 328. As well as Calvin in John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (transl. by James Anderson; Vol. 3; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 330.

<sup>16</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms* (trans. by Francis Bolton; Vol. 2; BCOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 400-02. Tate disagrees that אלה equals יהוה as he sees יהוה-אל originating from Canaanite sources. Tate, *Psalms*, 329.

<sup>17</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2018), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 330.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Tate, *Psalms*, 330.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 157.

<sup>23</sup> Tate, *Psalms*, 330.

<sup>24</sup> F.J. Goldbaun, “Two Hebrew Quasi-Adverbs *lkn* and *akn*,” *JNES* 23 (1964), 135, cited in Tate, *Psalms*, 330.

<sup>j</sup> The ה preposition expresses agreement in kind or quality.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>k</sup> The ה preposition expresses agreement in kind or quality.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>l</sup> The יְהִי is used in an evidential sense, giving the motivation as to why Asaph calls upon God to judge the earth. This is based on Asaph's historical understanding of God and will be important in our interpretation below.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>m</sup> The idea of לְגִנְחָל is of God's hereditary and proprietary right among the nations.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is better, and in following my translation thus far, to translate this imperfect as a non-completed present action, rather than the future tense (ESV; KJV).<sup>29</sup> The idea being that God *presently* possesses the nations, though His judgment will be in the future.

<sup>n</sup> The spatial use of בְּ and could be translated, "from among," as in the nations are God's rightful domain.<sup>30</sup>

### Context: A Canaanite Psalm of Asaph?

The first contextual note of Psalm 82 must be that the psalm is part of the Asaphite collection (Psalms 50; 73-83). This grouping of Psalms exhibits the highest concentration of historical referents in the Psalter. The collection is essential in forming Israel's historic and cultic identity. Though there are other collections of psalms with historical referents (Ps. 105; 106; 135; 136), and other collections from the Levitical guilds (Korahites: Ps. 42; 44-49; 84-85- 87-88; Merarites: Ps. 39; 69; 77; 88-89), the Asaphite collection stands out as particularly historically focused.<sup>31</sup> Roughly 93 out of 262 verses in the collection appeal to history.<sup>32</sup> Further, the unified body of Asaphite psalms (Ps 73-83), thematically revolves around God as Judge of Israel's foes. The collection both begins and ends with God in His role as Judge.<sup>33</sup> God, indeed, is seen as Judge of all the earth (Ps 75:2; 82:8), yet, the stress of the psalms is God's activity within Israel,

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<sup>25</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 160.

<sup>28</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 404.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Christine Danette Brown Jones, *The Psalms of Asaph: A Study of the Function of a Psalm Collection* (PhD diss; Waco, TX: Baylor, 2009), 150-51 cited in Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 53.

as exemplified in 73:1. The general thrust being that God has, and will continue to, judge Israel's foes within the land of Canaan. This "cultic historiography" context of Asaph will be vastly important as we exegete Psalm 82. The Asaphite psalms are not intended to simply be songs of reminiscing for the preservation of Israelite identity, but the psalms take the past and apply it to a present situation.

Julian Morgenstern in, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," made significant headway, in the eyes of some,<sup>34</sup> towards a origin story of Psalm 82. Morgenstern asserts that verses 2-4 are an imposition of the Israelite psalmist on a Canannite poem.<sup>35</sup> Morgenstern argues that the psalm is a poem of Canaanite origin that was transmitted to Judah through the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Most likely, the poem had been passed down through a Galilean poet who was influenced by his Phoenician neighbors.<sup>36</sup> Though the Canaanite original articulated ethical corruptions, by either angels or lesser divine beings, the Yahwists adapted the poem by adding verses about human judges/rulers. It was only in this manner that the poem could be incorporated into the cultic practices of the Jerusalem Temple community.<sup>37</sup> Based on this diverse history, Psalm 82 is left in a confusing state as the subjects in the verses alternate between divine beings and human rulers.<sup>38</sup> The conclusions of Morgenstern and others (Ackerman, Fleming, Jungling, and Mullen) firmly fixed a scholarly consensus on the Canaanite origin of Psalm 82.<sup>39</sup> However, the Psalm's placement in the Asaphite collection, seems to mitigate against that conclusion. As mentioned above, the Asaphite collection transmits the highest concentration of Israelite history in the

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<sup>34</sup> Roger T. O'Callaghan, "A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82," *CBQ* 15 (1953), 311; Tate, *Psalms*, 332.

<sup>35</sup> Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 31-33.

<sup>36</sup> Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 121.

<sup>37</sup> Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 122.

<sup>38</sup> Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 33.

<sup>39</sup> Tate, *Psalms*, 332; O'Callaghan, "A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82," 311.

Psalter. Would it make sense for Asaph, or the compilers of the Psalter, to place a Phoenician poem near the end of this collection? The immediate context indicates that the psalm is not a Phoenician epic adapted by the Yahwists. For Psalm 82 is cultic historiography of the past, present, and future, Just Judge of *Israel*. If Asaph stole content from outside Israel's own history, it would be an unexpected insertion into his collection.

### What is the בְּעִדָּה־אֵל?

Before any exegetical analysis can be done on the psalm, we must first properly define what בְּעִדָּה intimates. The word עִדָּה can have the meaning of “company,” a group gathered around a prominent person, or a “council (of God),” or a “(cultic) congregation (of Israel).”<sup>40</sup> If it is a “divine council” (ESV; RSV) of Canannite gods, even utilized as a polemical literary device by Asaph,<sup>41</sup> it would be a unique entry on the Asaphite collection.<sup>42</sup> Goulder notes that besides six “historical” psalms (95; 105-106; 114; 135-136) it is difficult to identify any references to the Exodus. Yet, the Exodus experience is a recurrent theme in the Asaphite psalms. Further, the Asaphite collection is not limited to the Exodus event but recounts events throughout the Pentateuch.<sup>43</sup> The conjunction כָּל־עִדָּה בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל is referenced 11 times in the book of Exodus and 30 total times through the Pentateuch in some manner. The constant appeal in the Asaphite collection is for Israel to trust in the God Who has redeemed them and made covenant with them. Therefore, it makes more contextual sense to see בְּעִדָּה as a recollection of that repeated theme, particularly in the Exodus, of the “assembly” or “congregation” of Israel.

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<sup>40</sup> William L. Holladay, “בָּעִדָּה,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 265.

<sup>41</sup> Currid, *Against the gods*, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Nasuti admits that the idea of a divine council of gods is an aberration in the Psalter, but, common in the ANE. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 23.

Additional evidence for this is the attachment of 'לְאָ' to the “assembly.” 'לְאָ' often appears in compounds to ascribe attributes or possessions to Israel’s God. Yet, Holladay is unsure if 'לְאָ' is ever used in a superlative sense.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, an assembly that is a “divine” assembly is a harder reading. Instead, the conjunction is utilized in the possessive sense.<sup>45</sup> This assembly is the God of Israel’s assembly. He was and always will be the presiding Judge over His subjects. If one takes this reading, the intimacy between God and the subjects of the assembly critically influences the interpretation of the בְּלָהִים 'lāhīm themselves. Given the intimacy of God with the assembly of Israel in the Pentateuch, God’s judgment in Ps 82:2-4 makes sense. The assembly is His rightful possession (Ex 19:5) and must obey His commands (Ex 20-23:19). Otherwise, God holds the assembly of foreign gods to the same governmental standards that He covenantally requires of His redeemed people. In contrast, Niehr sees the oppressors of verses 2-4 as Canaanite officers misjudging Israel, and Gonzalez views the oppressors as Canaanite gods left within Israel.<sup>46</sup> However, the parallels between the prescribed laws on governmental justice (Ex 22:16-23:9; Lev 19:15) and Psalm 82:2-4 are too close to be applying to anyone other than Israel herself.<sup>47</sup> In fact, that is why Morgenstern sees them as a later addition to a Canaanite text.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the 'בְּלָהִים' is the “assembly (of Israel) possessed by God.”<sup>49</sup> God is not, more generally, an “executive of the divine assembly,”<sup>50</sup> but, He stands as Judge in Israel’s assembly, ready to judge them according to His covenantal standards.

<sup>44</sup> Holladay, “אָ,” *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 11-13.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 162.

<sup>47</sup> Goulder calls any interpretation other than national deities an attempt to evade “the plain meaning of the text.” Yet, he only bases that on the historical critical work of Mowinckel and does not deal with the covenantal connections of v. 1 with vv. 2-4. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Morgenstern, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” 31-33.

<sup>49</sup> Delitzsch calls the assembly God’s “theocratic congregation.” Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 402.

<sup>50</sup> Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 186.

The lynchpin in the exegetical argument for the subjects in the בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים comes from Jesus Himself in John 10:34-36. In this text the Pharisee's charge Jesus with blasphemy for making Himself equal to God. Jesus responds by quoting Ps 82:6, οὐκ ἔστιν γε γραμμένον ἐν τῷ νόμῳ ὑμῶν ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰπα· θεοί ἔστε (John 10:34). The basic argument that Jesus employs is that if the unbroken Scriptures (John 10:35) grant the title of “gods” to certain individuals (Ps 82:6), then how much more should the title “God” be given to the One sent from the Father (John 10:36).<sup>51</sup> It is clear from context that the “gods” of Ps 82:6 are the subjects in the בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים. Yet, if the subjects in the בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים were other national deities, then Jesus' usage here would appear to deviate from the original meaning. Additionally, in John 10:35 the “gods” addressed in Ps 82:6 are those “to whom the word of God came”; a formula that is employed regularly in Scripture for those who are commissioned to speak or rule in God's name.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים must consist of *human* beings and, further, those human beings must be human beings “to whom the word of God came.” This limits the scope even further down to human beings within the covenant nation Israel. For whom, in addition to Israel, could it be said that the “word of God came”? Lastly, the בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים must consist of human beings within Israel that God has granted particular authority to rule. The concept of God standing in בָּעֵדֶת־אֱלֹהִים, ready to judge “gods” by His covenantal standards, displays the special kingship God has over Israel and His oversight that His laws are the standard by which the rulers of Israel must govern.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ridderbos does not view the argument as a “lesser to greater” argument by Jesus, but instead, as a simple point made by Jesus to invalidate the claims of blaspheming by calling Himself the Son of God. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary* (transl. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 374-75. In either case, the point is still the same in regards to our current topic: God was pleased to bestow the title “gods” to others whom He has granted particular authority.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. e.g. Gen 5:1; Jer 1:25; Hos 1:1; Micah 1:1'; Ziph 1:1; 1 Sam 15:10; Luke 3:2. Ridderbos, *John*, 373.

<sup>53</sup> Ridderbos, *John*, 732-33.

## Analysis

### Verse 1

The Psalm opens without an introduction, bringing immediate attention onto אלֹהִים and his נִצָּב. The Niphal participle here does not so much designate the suddenness or the novelty of God's appearance, but rather, it designates the "statue-like immobility" and "terrifying designfulness" of His appearance.<sup>54</sup> God's standing is perhaps an oddity, since one might assume a judge or king would be seated in the assembly. However, Ackerman gives two reasons that a sovereign would stand up in court; first, to receive acknowledgment of his lordship in his court, and secondly, in order to address the accused by stating the charges and pronouncing the sentence.<sup>55</sup>

The second use of אלֹהִים refers to the subjects of the assembly, which God stands בְּקָרְבָּן. In the rest of the Asaphite collection the focus is on Israel herself and her militaristic enemies. Thus, any interpretation of אלֹהִים as other deities, or angels, would come suddenly and enter a new idea into the collection. It is evident from places, such as 2 Sam 19:11, that the "elders" or "leaders" within Israel had considerable power, enough that their authority is needed to appoint kings. If Israelite kings could be called אלֹהִים (Ps 45:7)<sup>56</sup> then certainly other Israelite rulers could take on an aspect of the title. The One אלֹהִים has conferred a derivative power upon these subordinate אלֹהִים as His representatives and unique bearers of His image.<sup>57</sup> It is based upon this exalted role within Israel that their neglect of God's covenantal standards brings them harsher judgment.

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<sup>54</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 402.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Tate, *Psalms*, 335.

<sup>56</sup> Ps 45:8 in WTT.

<sup>57</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 402.

*Verses 2-5*

The אֱלֹהִים have procured God's judgment by תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ-עַל. This phrase has a direct parallel in Lev 19:15, giving significant weight to the fact that these אֱלֹהִים are abusive Israelite officials. God's poignant question implies that the אֱלֹהִים should have "known better" than to rule in an oppressive manner. Certainly, this could be taken as a natural law admonition by God to any entity, whether divine or human, outside of Israel. However, it seems best to see v. 2 as God's charge that the rulers have broken His statute, לֹא-תַעֲשׂו עֹל בְּמִשְׁפָּט (Lev 19:15). Further, the words לְ (v. 3), נִתְּהֵם (v. 3), and נִאֲבִין (v. 4) are words frequently repeated in Isaiah towards those invested with the power and dignity of law, jurisdiction, and justice to care for those without authority.<sup>58</sup>

It is not immediately evident who takes up speech in v. 5, yet, it is natural to see it as an extension of God's discourse concerning the rulers.<sup>59</sup> Regardless if the speaker is God or an Asaphite interpolation, the point remains the same; the אֱלֹהִים are blind, unwilling to discern right from wrong. Under their authority יְמָעוֹת כָּל-מָסְדֵּי אָרֶץ. This hyperbolic statement is undergirded within an OT concept that just judgment is the substructure of the universe.<sup>60</sup> If those appointed by God, possessing derivative authority from Him, cannot judge justly, then the very foundation of His creational design threatens to break. Indeed, a proper administration of justice requires the strong to be the natural protectors of the weak. Mal-administration sees the partiality of the strong towards the weak for self-gain. If this occurs in any community or nation, it may well be compared to the ensuing chaos that would occur if the foundations of the earth were removed.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 403.

<sup>59</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 298; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 403.

<sup>60</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 157.

<sup>61</sup> Barnes, *Psalms*, 330.

### Verses 6-7

Verse 6 begins with “crass anthropomorphism” as Kraus calls it.<sup>62</sup> While we wouldn’t want to use the word “crass,” verse 6 certainly is exceptionally anthropomorphic. God once said to Himself, or thought, so highly of the rulers as to think of them as “gods.” Their rule and authority so far resembled God Himself that they were like His sons. Nevertheless, having seen their covenantal rebellion, He revokes His high regard for them, saying they truly are just common men who will die and like the rest of the Gentile rulers they will fall (v. 7).<sup>63</sup> This is poetic language speaking as if their divine status will be stripped from them; no longer will they be immune to mortality.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, the language of בָּנִי עָלֵין (v. 6) is paralleled in Luke 6:35, where Jesus calls anyone who treats their neighbor by the biblical ethical standard, νιοὶ ὑψίστου. The usage of ὑψίστος in the NT is rare, and therefore, it is significant that Jesus uses it here with the concept of “radical generosity.”<sup>65</sup> It appears that the principle of Luke 6:35 is virtually identical with Ps 82:2-6, though with different subjects. The subjects in Luke 6:35 are common Israelites, who have the obligation and responsibility to serve and protect their neighbors. Yet, for both groups in these passages, God has bestowed upon them an ethical responsibility, that when obeyed makes them “sons of the Most High.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, since the אֲלֹהִים have not obeyed God’s precepts, they are stripped of their status as בָּנִי עָלֵין.<sup>67</sup> This parallel, and Jesus’

<sup>62</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 157.

<sup>63</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 404.

<sup>64</sup> Tate, *Psalms*, 338. Though, Tate sees this as “literal” mythical imagery of the punishment of certain gods.

<sup>65</sup> Aaron J. Kuecker, “You Will Be Children of the Most High”: An Inquiry into Luke’s Narrative Account of Theosis,” *JBI* 8.2 (2014): 217.

<sup>66</sup> See Kuecker’s essay for an analysis of how this then relates to Jesus as the “Son of the Most High” in Luke. Kuecker, “You Will Be Children of the Most High”: An Inquiry into Luke’s Narrative Account of Theosis,” 213-228.

<sup>67</sup> Another parallel to God stripping power from the present rulers is found in Matthew 23. The Pharisees, who sit on the seat of Moses, himself called אֲלֹהִים in Exodus 4:16, will be judged and their rule be given to another (Matt 21:43).

interpretation of verse 6 in John 10:34-36, again show that “god-like” rulers in Israel are God’s subjects of punishment.

### Verse 8

The evidential use of יְהִי is vital for understanding the end of the psalm in the context of the Asaphite collection. The focus in verse 8 moves from God’s past judgment on the rulers of Israel, to the Psalmists cry for God’s justice to go out equally upon all nations. It is erroneous to draw the inference backwards from this verse into the rest of the psalm, seeing it all as about outside nations.<sup>68</sup> This verse is an example of Asaph’s mnemohistory having tangible effects for the theological and religious life of Israel in the present day. The past work of God is essential to remember, for in remembering, Israel can then call upon God to act again in a similar manner.<sup>69</sup> It is implied from verses 2-7 that God is ruling over Israel, therefore, the petition for God to שִׁפְטֵה הָאָרֶץ is an extension of God’s justice within Israel to all the earth. This is Asaph’s call for a “realignment of world order” around the One, True God.<sup>70</sup> As Kidner considers it, this psalm ends very much the same as 1 Corinthians, Μαρτυρεῖ θεόν!<sup>71</sup>

### Theological Implications

The modern day theological implications of Psalm 82 are significantly dependent on how one takes the subjects of the בָּעֵדָת-אֱלֹהִים. If they are the Canaanite gods that surround the Yahweh-centric Israel, then God declares their fundamental injustices over their own national people.

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<sup>68</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalm*, 404.

<sup>69</sup> The ideas of the effects of Asaph’s remembering come from Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 187, though his premise is that Asaph’s recounting of history is “remembered for the purpose of transforming it.”

<sup>70</sup> D.M. Fleming, *The Divine Council as Type-Scene in the Hebrew Bible* (Ph.D. diss.; SBTS, 1989), 146 cited in Tate, *Psalm*, 339.

<sup>71</sup> Kidner, *Psalm*, 299.

Whether taken as a polemical device,<sup>72</sup> or as a step in religious evolution towards monotheism,<sup>73</sup> the meaning of God's judgment is the same; אֱלֹהִים is the שָׁלֵׁוּן over them. He is the Just God, Who does no injustice to the weak and shows no partiality to the wicked. Those governmental ethics should have been known by the gods by a natural law principle. Thus, God not only stands distinct in His governmental power, but also His governmental purity against the gods. This pure and almighty God then is the שָׁלֵׁוּן Who should rule over all the earth (v.8). This reality is finally culminated in Revelation 7:9-10 where Christ, the Lamb of God, is on the throne of God, in the midst of heaven, receiving praise and power from all tribes and nations.

Yet, in arguing for human subjects of the בְּשֻׁתְּאָל, there are somewhat different theological implications. The אֱלֹהִים Who has possessed an assembly out of Egypt, Who has given them His governmental laws, stands in their midst to charge their rulers with covenantal rebellion. Those אֱלֹהִים have not reflected the benevolence of God towards the socially destitute, though they had been invested with the dignity and power of God's law and jurisdiction.<sup>74</sup> These אֱלֹהִים do not possess the right to self-government, they are answerable to the שָׁלֵׁוּן. If their practices do not match the Most High's prescriptive (Lev 19:15) then they will be divested of their glory and status as "gods" in Israel.<sup>75</sup> This indeed is not only a lesson within the old covenant nation, but for the new nation of God, the Church (1 Pet 2:9). The prescriptive of Leviticus 19:15 and Psalm 82:3-4 were not abrogated at the coming of Christ, but still apply as governmental ethics within the Church. Hence, the "rulers" of the Church are held to this standard. God the Holy Spirit is in their midst (1 Cor 3:16) to govern them as Judge. Although the NT never attributes the title "gods" to the Church's apostles, prophets, or elders, they are

<sup>72</sup> Currid, *Against the gods*, 140.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph*, 187.

<sup>74</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 403.

<sup>75</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 404.

called the representatives of Christ, and God Himself is said to be speaking through them (2 Cor 5:20; 1 Thess 2:13). This is undoubtedly carrying similar connotations as is the divine status פָּרָשִׁים in Psalm 82:1. Nonetheless, they have a difficult duty to promote righteousness and condemn wickedness as shepherds under Christ their God (1 Pet 5:1-4). These rulers guide and guard the only pillar of truth on earth (1 Tim 3:15). If they fail in this divine calling, it is as if the very foundations of the earth will shake, and in judgment God will come, and they will fall like any common man (Jude 11-16).

Secondarily, all governments throughout the world are ultimately subject to the יְהָוָה. Even though this paper's main thesis is that the psalm is directed towards Israelite rulers, the psalm does secondarily apply to all national rulers. For all government is of God, and there is no power but of God.<sup>76</sup> The governmental official is God's own servant (Rom 13:4) regardless of their affiliation within His Church. For this very reason Luther exhorted all rulers to get all of Psalm 82 painted upon the walls of their rooms, for besides the ministerial office, the governmental leader holds the highest service of God on earth.<sup>77</sup> It is in all governments that God has instilled the principle of justice (Psalm 82:5). If indeed it is true, that God is the Judge over all governments, then God's people may rest calmly and quietly in any society. For even in a society with corrupt and unjust rulers, as in Israel in Psalm 82, the people of God may know that God especially regards the lowly and watches over the afflicted (Ps 82:3-4).<sup>78</sup> He will not abandon them to oppressors, but He will arise and judge the earth (Ps 82:8). For in the great

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<sup>76</sup> William S. Plumer, *Psalm: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1990), 783.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in F.B. Meyer, *Psalm: Bible Readings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 101.

<sup>78</sup> Plumer, *Psalm*, 783.

injustices of life God is not silent nor complicit. Instead, He stands ready, even at the door (Jas 5:9), to gather all the earth to His assembly, to mete out equity once and for all (Rev 19:11-16).