

CHOOSE YOU THIS DAY

LESSON 8: THE THIRD REBELLION

Objectives

- Learn that God uses some of His created beings to do His work at times.
- Understand what it means for God to talk to “the gods” in Psalm 82.
- Consider the motivations behind the building of the Tower of Babel.

Introduction

I have increasingly come to believe that today’s lesson is a very important one for the Church. We seem to have a view of the spirit realm that is closer to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* than to what the Bible actually says. I have already uncovered one area in which we have remained largely uninformed, which is the history of spirit beings mixing their DNA with that of humans. Today we need to look in a broader way at these spirit beings (and others) to form a biblical picture of how God uses His creatures behind the scenes.

Since I will be telling you some things that you may have never heard before, I need to make it very clear that I am not bringing you “new knowledge” or a modern, progressive, liberal way of thinking. I am actually trying to take us back to the way the biblical authors understood the world so that we can interpret Scripture through that lens. They had a supernatural worldview which is very different from the scientific mindset that we were raised with and that has even shaped our Christian homes, churches, and seminaries. On one hand, many Christians tend to consider that the invisible realm is a peripheral subject which need not be investigated by the average person. On the other end of the spectrum are the Christian traditions that make so much of the invisible realm that they are constantly seeking to interact with it without a solid biblical framework for their actions. We will find that the ancient supernatural worldview will inform our interpretations and practices in very important ways, and that we can remain firmly grounded in the Bible as we seek this understanding. Incidentally, one reason you have not heard this taught in church before is because it’s only been since about 2010 that the scholarship was done on the ancient documents that give us more clarity.

I owe this lesson largely to the work of Dr. Michael S. Heiser. His PhD is in Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages, and he has also earned two MA’s: one in Ancient History and one in Hebrew Studies. Not only is he well-qualified to explain the nuances of the biblical languages, but more importantly, he is a committed believer and upholds the inerrancy of Scripture and the sovereignty of God with everything he says. I had begun to explore this topic a few years ago and quickly found that most online discussions along these lines led back to Dr. Heiser, largely because he is one of few scholars who has a passion for making topics from academia understandable for laypeople. He did his doctoral dissertation on **Psalm 82** (one of the key passages we’ll be looking at) and maintains a few websites that catalog his work. Fortunately for us, he has pulled a synopsis of his previous writings about the spirit world into a book called *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. I will indicate when I am directly quoting his exact words and will footnote the page numbers that I am drawing from, but in order to give proper credit I must acknowledge that this lesson (and the next) is a birds-eye view of his book, rearranged and simplified to give us the parts that will

help us most as we progress through *Choose You This Day*. As always, the Scripture passages themselves will be the most important places to look.

Dr. Heiser introduces his presentation this way, giving us a heads-up that we will be encountering some material that may be new to us:

What you'll read in this book won't overturn the important applectarts of Christian doctrine, but you'll come across plenty of mind grenades.¹

We believe some weird stuff

Let's face it... we Christians believe some very strange things. We believe two of each type of animal climbed into a huge box to survive a global deluge. We believe a girl became pregnant without having sex and that her child was both God and man. We believe a guy walked out of a tomb (past an entire Roman guard) after being professionally executed three days earlier.

We believe the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God (which means there are no mistakes in the original manuscripts). Therefore, we believe that God purposed for the following passages to be included in Scripture:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. Job 1:6

And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' I Kings 22:20-21

The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men. Daniel 4:17

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment. Psalm 82:1

Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! I Corinthians 6:3

What should we do with passages like that? Skip over them because they're too absurd and figure God will explain it all to us one day? I'm afraid that's what usually happens, even though an understanding of the "weird parts" can dramatically enhance our walk with God and help to fill out the cohesive worldview that we are trying to develop.

We won't be tackling every biblical passage that makes you furrow your eyebrows, but the ones we just looked at can all be explained very satisfactorily when we understand the ancient supernatural worldview.

¹ Heiser, Michael S. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015. 13.

Dr. James Hamilton gets us started with a bit of perspective on what we're trying to do:

The biblical authors used biblical theology to interpret the Scriptures available to them and the events they experienced. The goal of biblical theology is simply to learn this practice of interpretation from the biblical authors so that we can interpret the Bible and life in this world the way they did.²

Dr. Heiser shows the difference between this approach and what we often do instead:

Most of our exegeses involves breaking up passages and verses into their constituent parts, whereas the biblical writers were creating connections between texts.³

He likens the process of discovery about the supernatural realm to the creation of a mosaic, as opposed to the filtering of information. Instead of only examining certain parts of Scripture and ignoring the others, we should step back and see the literary mosaic that is formed when all the pieces are considered together. Up close, these pieces may appear to be randomly assembled, but when you step back you see that each piece is essential and beautiful.⁴

God's Heavenly Family

So what am I actually getting at? What is so mysterious that it requires this much set-up before I make the grand announcement about what we're going to discover? It is this: God has sons.

God has created a host of nonhuman... beings whose domain is (to human eyes) an unseen realm. And because he created them, he claims them as his sons, in the same way you claim your children as your sons and daughters because you played a part in their creation.⁵

We did a lot of work on this point in the last lesson when we identified some of these spiritual beings and talked about the sons of God as direct creations of God. We know that those who are in Christ are called members of the family of God. So it is natural to conclude that when God calls supernatural beings His sons, he considers them to be part of His family, too.

Does God need a family, either human or otherwise? Of course not. As God, He has no deficiencies that need to be filled by anyone or anything else. But it will become clear from the Bible that He uses both a spiritual "council"⁶ and physical humans to accomplish His plans.

² Hamilton, James M., Jr. *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010. 42. He goes on to say: "One of the key tasks of biblical theology is to trace the connections between themes and show the relationships between them... what the Bible meant for the purpose of understanding what the Bible means," page 45.

³ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 386.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ I want to make it very clear that my usage of the term "council" is not in the sense of a "counselor" who gives advice to people. God does not require advice from anyone and will always make the wisest decisions without needing advisors, like a human king would. Think more in terms of an administrative body (like a city council) that is chosen to make laws, rules, or decisions.

Did He need to make humans to tend the Garden and steward the Earth? No, there is nothing humans do that God couldn't do for Himself, but He chose to make people to fill these roles. Does He need worship from creatures? No, but he desires to have it. God seems to delight in creating proxies to represent Him and carry out His wishes.^{7,8}

The story of the Bible is about God's will for, and rule of, the realms he has created, visible and invisible, through the imagers he has created, human and nonhuman. [God's] agenda is played out in both realms, in deliberate tandem.⁹

Humans are God's administrators in the physical realm. The sons of God (some of whom we identified in the last lesson as those who left their heavenly abode and rebelled) are the ones that carry out His will in the unseen realm. God's ultimate goal is to have us all as one family, functioning together where He is.¹⁰

When I used to let my young children "help" me with a job, I often thought about how much easier it would have been to just do it myself. It's more difficult to make the cookies turn out right when inexperienced little hands are doing the measuring and pouring, and there's certainly a lot more of a mess to clean up at the end! But I took delight in letting my children participate, and they certainly enjoyed being part of the process. It was a beautiful experience of fellowship as we shared the work. I didn't mind a bit when they offered a cookie to Daddy saying, "Look what I made!" Daddy and I would wink at each other because we both knew the truth: those cookies would not be cookies if I had not guided every step of the process, even though they got to decide whether we put in chocolate or butterscotch chips.

"Lesser Elohim"

When it comes to determining what Scripture says about God's unseen kingdom, the pattern that unfolds is that His "divine council" or "heavenly host" is often on hand when He is about to make a major move. He includes them in the decision-making (not because He needs advice, but because it is His pleasure to include them) and they are often the vehicle through whom He issues His decrees. We'll look at examples soon.

First, though, we must examine the Hebrew word *elohim*. You may have been taught that this is one of the names of God, but it's really a generic word that may or may not refer to *The* God.

⁷ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 49.

⁸ "The ubiquity and significance of this imagery in the theology and cosmology of the ancient Near East keeps us from being surprised to find it appearing in some fashion within Israel, even in highly modified form. The unarguable monotheistic thrust of the Old Testament and Israel's religion, at least in the official forms in which it comes down to us, has kept us from giving much attention to this conceptuality even though it is widespread in the Old Testament and not confined to any particular era, genre, or corpus of literature." Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol." From *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (vol. 267; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). 425.

⁹ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 38.

¹⁰ "Language describing believers as sons or children of God (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-3), or as 'adopted' into God's family (Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) is neither accidental nor pragmatic. It reflects the original vision of Genesis. And once we are glorified, the two council-families will be one—in a new Eden." Ibid., 43.

There are other beings called *elohim*, so we can accurately say that there are many gods – the key is to use a small “g” and to acknowledge without exception that all but One are created beings and are in no way equal with or superior to Yahweh.

There are several uses of *elohim* in the Bible.

- Yahweh (used thousands of times)
- The members of God’s divine family (**Psalm 82:1, 6**)
- Other nations’ gods and goddesses (**Judges 11:24, 1 Kings 11:33**)
- A demon (**Deuteronomy 32:17**)
- The spirit of Samuel (**1 Samuel 28**)
- Possibly angels (see **Genesis 35:7**)

Elohim is a “place of residence” term, showing us that these beings originate in what we call the “spirit realm” where the entities do not have physical bodies like we do. They are not made of the dust of the earth like we are. The biblical writers simply could not have intended for us to think that the word *elohim* refers to the set of attributes that define Yahweh as God, even though that is what we think of when we see the English letters G-O-D. If they had, they would not have used the same word to represent so many different things.

To say that every time we see the word *elohim* we are talking about Yahweh would be the same as saying that every time we see the word “spirit” it means the Holy Spirit.

Yahweh is an *elohim*, but the other *elohim* are not Yahweh. He is different.

- He created the others.
- He preexisted.
- He is ultimately sovereign.
- He deserves worship.
- He possesses the divine attributes we use to define God.

It’s no more bizarre to say that God created a group of beings that He allows to help rule the universe than it is to say that He lets humans make choices in our own lives and does not always override those choices, or that He includes *us* in His own work.

The reason to spend so much time on this point is to make it clear that we are not suggesting that plural *elohim* in the Bible means that there is a pantheon of beings that are interchangeable and equally powerful. The biblical writers knew very well that Yahweh could never be defeated by any of the other *elohim*. They are His creatures. We are not slipping into polytheism by acknowledging that God has a council of *elohim* to whom He grants a measure of free will. I will sometimes use the term “lesser *elohim*” to identify them. This distinguishes them from Yahweh and is less generic than “angels.”

Hierarchy

There seems to be a structure of layered authority within the spirit world, much as we see in the human realm. The people of the ancient world understood the concept of a powerful king

who had a close group of elite administrators (often relatives) with lower-level assistants and servants under them.

Paul shows that he grasps the existence of this structure when he names some of the different types of evil spirit beings.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12

The Psalmist also demonstrates an understanding of layered authority in God's creation.

What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. Psalm 8:4-5

The word for "heavenly beings" there is *elohim*.¹¹ An interesting thing to file away in our minds here is that an Old Testament writer under inspiration declared the rankings as they existed at that time: humans were lower than heavenly beings (or "angels," see **Hebrews 2:7**).

Sovereignty and Choices

God's spiritual servants are not perfect. Some of them have chosen to sin against God.

Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error. Job 4:18¹²

Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water! Job 15:15-16¹³

As beings that are made in His image, they are given a measure of freedom to make choices.¹⁴ Even existence in the presence of the Holy God does not guarantee that a human or nonhuman entity will never violate God's will or act out of selfish desire. If that were so, Adam and Eve never would have sinned.

God could have prevented His creatures from making choices, and so He could have preserved Eden and had His perfect place to live. But He wanted something more than that, which was to actually indwell His creatures. Accomplishing that required willful participation in

¹¹ Surely this usage of *elohim* cannot be referring to Yahweh himself, since we are not just a *little* lower than Him... we are immeasurably below Him!

¹² Although I expect that Job's "friend," Eliphaz, knew some stories from his ancestors about the Watchers and that this may be where he got this knowledge about angels sinning, we do need to keep in mind when we read Job that his friends are not always correct!

¹³ Both of these references are spoken by Job's "friend," Eliphaz. Notice the shared knowledge they had before Scripture was written about how things worked behind the scenes. This is not surprising when we understand that the supernatural realm had been interacting with the natural realm in ways that are different from our day.

¹⁴ Dr. Heiser discusses at length what it means to be made in the image of God and why we should conclude that the lesser *elohim* are also made in His image (as His representatives). This is a fascinating and important point, yet we do not have time to pause here in the flow of our investigation. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 40ff and 59ff.

God's work by His imagers. He was not content to settle for less. He would accomplish His original objective by His original means.¹⁵

God cannot be made less or be forced to do anything because of the actions of His agents, but He is personally affected by human sin and suffering (see the emotion found in **Genesis 6:6 and Isaiah 54:6-7**). It grieves Him.

God determines how things will end up, but He doesn't necessarily make all the decisions ahead of time about how to achieve His decreed ends. He often includes His creatures in those decisions. "The end is sovereignly ordained; the means to the end may or may not be."¹⁶ He will never allow creatures to do things that will prevent His purposes from being accomplished (just like I would not allow my kids to use three cups of salt in a recipe instead of flour, even though I may let them do some pouring and allow them to decide whether to add nuts or not).

We can understand this when it comes to the free will that God gives us as humans, but the idea that God also has divine beings that He allows to be part of the decision-making process may be a new one. Let's look at some passages where we see this in action.

The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, and the decision by the command of the holy ones, in order that the living will know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of humankind, and to whomever he wills he gives it. Daniel 4:17

This is one of those sections that we usually skip because we don't understand it! Daniel is simply using the same word for the sons of God that *1 Enoch* used: Watchers. These lesser *elohim* have decreed in a dream that Nebuchadnezzar will lose his mind and be like a tree that has been chopped off at the stump. The Watchers are the source of the decree and they have clearly made the decision, but a definitive statement is also being made about God's sovereignty: He gives to whomever He wills. When Daniel explains the dream to the king, he shows that God is the one whose authority stands behind the decree, even though He had allowed His servants to decide on the particulars.

This is the explanation, O king, and it is a decree of the Most High that has come upon my lord the king. Daniel 4:24

Job's story is another example in which God allowed a free-will agent to decide on the details. God desires that His people be tested, and we see here that He brought Job to the tester's attention.

And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Job 1:8

When Satan complained that God had put a hedge of protection around Job, God removed that protection but set a boundary. Satan was not allowed to harm Job himself, but he did go on to take the lives of his children, servants, and livestock. Later he was given permission to harm Job's body if only he spared his life, so he struck Job with painful sores. God wanted

¹⁵ Ibid., 358.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

Job's loyalty to be tested but He did not tell Satan to go and do these horrible things. He brought Job to Satan's attention then gave permission for Satan to do the things he wanted to do. (This may not be very comforting to know that God brought it up even though He didn't personally determine the particulars, but we must never lose sight of the transformational work that suffering accomplishes in our lives. Surely the tender heart of God wept with Job in his pain even as He rejoiced in his loyalty.)

Another example of God allowing evil beings to make decisions to accomplish His own ends is found in **1 Kings 22**. In this passage, God has decreed that it is time for wicked Ahab to die. Before he goes into battle Ahab summons all of his prophets to tell him whether he will be successful, and they all agree that he will win. Then Micaiah, a true prophet of God, offers a description of the unique vision he has been given in which he sees God with His heavenly family around Him.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord saying, "I will entice him." And the Lord said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he said, "You are to entice him and you shall succeed; go out and do so." Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has declared disaster for you." 1 Kings 22:19-23 (see also 2 Chronicles 18:18-22)

Notice a few things. First, God's stated end is that Ahab will be enticed into battle in a certain location and will die there. Then we see that the "host of heaven" (another title for the lesser *elohim*) discuss the matter, each proposing different ideas. This is why the heavenly host are often referred to as God's "heavenly council" or "divine council." They have discussions about things and God lets them propose ideas. Finally, one of them offers to go and cause Ahab's prophets to lie to him. God did not tell this spirit to lie because He will never command sin.¹⁷ He simply repeated His desire when He gave the command: that the spirit go *entice* Ahab... to convince him to go. God didn't say, "go ahead and lie," but knowing the spirit would lie, God informed him that he would be successful. This is still not easy to accept if you never knew this passage was even in the Bible (it's there twice... we can't suspect a typo!), but it is perhaps the clearest picture we have of the behind-the-scenes workings of the divine council.¹⁸

¹⁷ Dr. Heiser sees this differently (as expressed in the Q&A session at a seminar in Plain City, OH on November 7, 2015). He considers it to be a legitimate "battle strategy" to deceive your enemy and that it was similar to the Israelite midwives' claim that they couldn't kill the Hebrew baby boys because their mothers gave birth before they got there. Even though I am expressing a different opinion, we agree that God does not sin or command His agents to sin. My own opinion aligns with the *ESV Study Bible*: "Though God himself does not do evil, he sometimes uses evil agents to accomplish his purposes." (Commentary notes for 1 Kings 22:23; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.)

¹⁸ It's important for me to note along the way here in this discussion that there is not a lot of commentary support for the view I'm expressing, in which God allows His council members to make the decisions about how to carry out His will. Some pastors and teachers believe this 1 Kings 22 passage is an example of God anthropomorphizing Himself so that He can be understood by humans and that He is not literally giving these spiritual agents a choice in the matter. I maintain that my explanation is consistent and coherent and does not present a diminished view of God's sovereignty. Rather, it *elevates* my perception of God's power because I find it exceedingly impressive that He can accomplish His work while letting imperfect creatures participate!

As those who have declared our loyalty to God and surrendered our lives to Him, don't we want to help Him accomplish His purposes using *good* methods?

Israelite Understanding of the Divine Council

We have been exploring what the divine council is to God and how He allows the council members to make decisions, even as He directs the ultimate ends of those decisions and stamps them with His authority. Let's move our attention now to the ancient Israelite understanding of their existence.

The ancient Near East people, including Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Israelites, believed in an unseen spiritual world that was governed by a divine council. It's a concept that was often mythologized, so we see that same root idea springing forth into imaginative variations in the different cultures and religions that sprang up after the Tower of Babel. Although the details vary, some seed concepts remain consistent. For example, these ancient people believed that the gods had places where they met to govern the affairs of the human world, and these meeting places were most commonly gardens and mountains.¹⁹ Gardens are lush places of abundance. Mountains "touch the heavens." Therefore, these would be the logical places to find the gods, according to ancient Near East thinking. Naturally, they began to build pyramid and ziggurat structures to represent mountains, and to adorn them with carvings and paintings that depicted gardens. In this way, they believed they were building a place where they could connect with the spirit realm and possibly even tap into its power.

We see several descriptions of God's throne room in the Bible in which God is surrounded by heavenly beings and is ready to conduct business (e.g., **Isaiah 6; 1 Kings 22:13-28**). A three-tiered structure is presented, with Yahweh at the top, the sons of God below Him, and the messengers (angels) below them.²⁰ While the Israelites recognized that there were other spirit-beings in council with God, they referred to Yahweh as *el-elyon* or "God Most High" to show that He is superior to all others. In fact, the way God works through a council parallels the way other ancient Near East writings portray the gods of other religions, *but the Old Testament material is presented as a correction to those older writings*.²¹ In contrast with the other gods, Yahweh is shown to be a God of order, a God that is just and patient, and the only true God.

Eden is described in the Bible as a garden *and* the mountain of God (**Ezekiel 28:13-14**), which would have caused the Israelite readers to have the mental image that this was God's abode and the place where He met with His council. The reader would not have expected Eve to be surprised that she was talking to a spirit being because she was living in the place where the *elohim* lived.²²

¹⁹ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46. Dr. Heiser notes that this matches the neighboring Ugarit depictions of God's council. Some Hebrew writers eventually came to include the presence of a second person that is also Yahweh at the top of the hierarchy (not a created *elohim*, but ruling with Yahweh), corresponding to the Ugarit notion of a coregent or vizier with their high god.

²¹ Modern scholarship loves to make the claim that the Old Testament is mimicking the older writings and therefore must not be true, but the crucial distinctions about Yahweh's character, motives, and methods indicate that the OT authors were very intentional in their use of this other material and were not just randomly copying and making things up to fill the gaps.

²² Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 73.

Another important thing to note about the ancient Israelite worldview is that they did not regard the “gods” as being mere idols of wood or stone. They understood that the physical emblems that were carved and crafted represented actual spirit beings.²³

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. Deuteronomy 32:17

For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. Psalm 97:9

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Psalm 29:1

It’s no compliment to God to say that He is greater than beings that do not even exist, so the existence of other gods must inform our interpretation of Scripture. Ancient idol worshipers did not believe that their idols were merely stone or wood. They believed that the stone or wood was inhabited by the actual god. They even held ceremonies in which they would “open the mouth” of the idol so that the deity would animate it.²⁴ They would also destroy worn-out idols without fear of penalty, knowing the god was not dead because it could simply inhabit a new statue.

Paul may seem to contradict this idea when he first claims idols are nothing:

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”

But keep reading!

**For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.
1 Corinthians 8:4-6**

His point is that there are other “gods” and “lords” but we have chosen the ultimate one—the Creator God. He leaves us no doubt about who is behind idols just two chapters later:

What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 1 Corinthians 10:19-20

The image itself has no power, but the demon or *elohim* behind the image is very real.

²³ Some scholars claim that when God says “there is none besides me” that it means no other *elohim* exist. There are simply too many other times that the reality of lesser *elohim* are affirmed. These “denial statements” are declaring that no other *elohim* compares to Yahweh. See the same Hebrew phrase used in Isaiah 47:8 and Zephaniah 2:15. In each of these passages, a city is claiming that “there is none besides me.” The point of the phrase is not to declare that no other city exists in the whole world, but that no other city can compare to their greatness.

²⁴ Curtis, Edward M. “Idol, Idolatry,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 377.

The Tower of Babel: The Third Rebellion

With this supernatural perspective, then, we can proceed to explore a historical event that is recorded not only in the Bible, but also in the writings of most of the ancient religions.²⁵ We have said that an ancient Israelite would attribute the condition of depravity on earth to three events, not just the Fall of man in Genesis 3. In the last lesson, we looked at the Second Rebellion—when the Watchers left their heavenly bodies, took on earthly ones, and created children in their own image with human women. Now we'll turn our attention to the Third Rebellion.

What happened behind the scenes at the Tower of Babel is foundational to understanding how the ancients viewed the supernatural world.²⁶ We'll set this up now, but in the next lesson we'll look more closely at how this influenced the worldview of the New Testament writers and how it affects us personally. The text is found in Genesis 11:1-9.

Clearly, the people intended to determine and establish their own destiny. This is exactly the opposite of what God intended when He created the world. He had told them to be fruitful and fill the earth (**Genesis 9:7**), not to stay in one place combining resources to accomplish their ambitions. They were not actually trying to physically reach as high into the atmosphere as they possibly could, otherwise they would have started at a much higher elevation than the plains of Shinar.

Symbolically (and probably literally), they were trying to attain deity through their own efforts.

Remember that the ancient people viewed God's meeting place with the heavenly host to be a garden or a mountain. High places have always been associated with "reaching the gods."²⁷

The tower was more likely a ziggurat than the traditional pictures we have of a spiraling tower. The shape of a ziggurat closely matches that of a pyramid. Both are designed to represent mountains, which bring to mind the idea that God resides on a high mountain.²⁸ The king's throne room would be at the top of the mountain, and it would be as though he had become a god. Recall the lies the Serpent told Eve in the Garden ("you can be like *elohim*" and "you can have special knowledge"). The pursuit of these same goals is evident in the building of the Tower and in the Babylonian Mystery Religion that sprang up immediately afterwards. We will see in later lessons that *organized* pagan religion began right here, although we can trace improper worship all the way back to Cain.

²⁵ For a detailed chart with quotes of twenty-three stories of the language division from all parts of the world, see Hodge, Bodie, *Tower of Babel*, Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2012. 224-226. Examples of the Tower of Babel and God's confusion of the languages in other religious writings include *Babylonian History* (by a high priest of Babylon named Berossus in the third century B.C.), *Ninurta's Pride and Punishment* (from ancient Sumer; it includes the historical person of Nimrod by a different name), and the *Atrahasis* (a Babylonian epic in which the gods of the divine council are referred to as "sons of the high God Anu" and are involved in the division of the land that happened after the Tower of Babel).

²⁶ "The famous story of the building of the Tower of Babel is about much more than an ill-fated construction project and language confusion. The episode is at the heart of the Old Testament worldview." Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 112.

²⁷ Some examples of high places as connecting points to either Yahweh or to false gods would include Mt. Sinai, Mt. Hermon (see *1 Enoch*), Jacob's stairway, and all the altars the people kept building for their idols in the times of the Judges and Kings.

²⁸ The ziggurats at Nippur and Asshur were named "The House of the Mountain" and "The House of the Mountain of Heaven and Earth." Sarna, Nahum M. *Understanding Genesis*. New York: Schocken, 1970. 82.

Attempt to establish contact with the heavenly host

Consider the conditions leading up to this point in history. We established in the last lesson that the sons of God had been interacting with humanity hundreds of years before the Flood. If *1 Enoch* and other sources are correct, the Watchers presented mankind with valuable information about technology, medicine, and warfare. Since people lived very long lifespans and had more time to develop their ideas, it is reasonable to conclude that they did not live like primitive “cave men” but had an advanced civilization (the evidence of which was wiped out by the Flood). Scholars disagree on the level of advancement, but there is no disagreement about the fact that the world that Noah entered when he stepped off the ark was very different from what it was like beforehand. He simply did not have access to the ingenuities that had been developed earlier, yet he would have remembered these things and told stories about them to his descendants. Even as he started over in an agrarian lifestyle in a brand-new climate, Noah would have passed down to his descendants the oral traditions (including Enoch’s words) that directly connected certain previously-known technologies and practices to the Watchers.

Generations later, we find the people joining together to build a sacred mountain to make a name for themselves instead of obeying God’s mandate. What could be behind such a foolish desire and the massive expenditure of resources to accomplish it?

The nature of this structure makes evident the purpose in building it—to bring the divine down to earth... The building of the tower meant... substituting the rule of Babel’s gods for rule by Yahweh.²⁹

In other words, they were clearly not trying to build this structure to have a closer relationship with Yahweh. They were building it to call down the gods! Whether or not they were after the technology that had once been offered to mankind, they were certainly defying Yahweh and indicating their desire to “become like *elohim*” as the Serpent had promised Eve.³⁰ It is a repeat of the age-old lust for power and knowledge.

God’s Judgment

Since it was not yet in God’s timing to allow a world power to dominate the globe, He announced His intention to intervene.

“Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Genesis 11:7-8

God included the lesser *elohim* in His actions “Come, let us go down...,” yet the judgment is carried out by only one being—God Himself. We can’t see from that passage exactly how God involved the members of His council, but we can put some pieces together from other sources. One of God’s most severe forms of judgment is sometimes to give people what they

²⁹ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 114-115.

³⁰ “As in Gen. 3:22, the building of the tower at Babel is a sin against God as an effort to move into the divine world, the divine domain. The threatened loss of creature limits (3:22a and 11:6–7) leads in both instances... to the judging activity of God. In its judgment speech, Genesis 11, like 3:22, reflects a decree within the assembly to create human disorder for the sake of cosmic order, the confusion among humankind to inhibit the breakdown of the orderly relationship between divine and human worlds.” Miller, “Cosmology and World Order,” 435.

want,³¹ and this seems to be what happened in this case. The people had shunned Yahweh and His plan to use them to restore Eden, so He disinherited them and determined to start over. God divided the people into groups and allotted each group to one of His lesser *elohim*.

An ancient source called Pseudo-Jonathan describes the situation this way:

When the Most High made allotment of the world unto the nations which proceeded from the sons of Noach, in the separation of the writings and languages of the children of men at the time of the division, He cast the lot among the seventy angels, the princes of the nations... even at that time He established the limits of the nations according to the sum of the number of the seventy souls of Israel who went down into Mizraim [Egypt].³²

Although there is an obvious chronological error in associating the division of languages with the Egyptian Captivity, we can see from writings like this that the people understood there were spiritual beings behind the transaction.

It's interesting that the source gives the number 70 because this is the same number of individuals that are named in the "Table of Nations" in Genesis 10. It also matches the number of the sons of El in the divine council in Ugarit writings.³³

These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood. Genesis 10:32

Plato told a similar story:

In the days of old the gods had the whole earth distributed among them by allotment. There was no quarrelling; for you cannot rightly suppose that the gods did not know what was proper for each of them to have, or, knowing this, that they would seek to procure for themselves by contention that which more properly belonged to others. They all of them by just apportionment obtained what they wanted and people to their own districts... Now different gods had their allotments in different places which they set in order.³⁴

The point here is not to claim that any of these are inspired sources or that they are correct in all details. I am simply demonstrating how an idea came to be spread around the world because the seed truth existed in the ancient historical accounts and oral traditions that were passed down. However, the claim that God disinherited the nations and allotted them to the members of His council cannot be seriously considered unless the Bible itself also supports it. You may be surprised to find this passage that you have probably never noticed nestled right into the song Moses recited just before he died.

³¹ In Romans 1, Paul explains how God hands people over to their shameful lusts and to experience the natural progression and consequences of their perversions.

³² *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, translated by J.W. Etheridge, 1862. There is a serious chronological problem with the connection to the "seventy souls of Israel who went down into Mizraim" because Mizraim is Egypt, and this text is talking about the division that happened much earlier. We will find that this resulted from variant manuscripts.

³³ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 69.

³⁴ Plato, *Critias*, 479.

Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. Deuteronomy 32:7-9

Moses even refers to the fact that this knowledge was understood by the elders and passed down in their stories when he points out how the nations were allotted to the sons of God!³⁵

We must pause to consider the reason you have probably never noticed this verse. It's because most English translations read that the borders were fixed according to the "sons of Israel" instead of "sons of God." The ESV renders it "sons of God," while other modern translations include the possibility as a footnote. The variation comes from different Old Testament manuscripts, but we can be sure from the Dead Sea scrolls that "sons of God" is the correct reading.³⁶

Another angle is seen in this passage:

And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are to this day. Deuteronomy 4:19-20

It could not be more clear than the statement here that God has allotted the host of heaven to the people! We will see more later on about why they are associated with the sun, moon, and stars, but the phrase "host of heaven" refers to the spiritual members of God's family. When we put all the evidence from the ancient sources together with what the Scripture makes clear, we can conclude that God decreed at the time of the division of the languages—as part of the judgment for the Tower of Babel—that the nations He was disinheriting would have other *elohim* besides himself as their superintendants.³⁷

God's Inheritance

Even though God disinherited the nations, He did not completely forsake them. In **Genesis 11** we saw the allotment of the nations, but in the very next chapter God called Abram right out of the epicenter of the action and established a covenant with him that was intended to bless all the nations (**Genesis 12:1-3**). There would still be a way for them to leave their false gods and follow Yahweh!

This is where it gets profound. Even though God disinherited the nations (relinquished legal ownership of them and dispersed them among some members of His council), He didn't give

³⁵ The *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2012) note for Deuteronomy 32:8-9 states, "**According to the number of the sons of God** may suggest that certain angels ('sons of God'; see Job 1:6) are responsible for specific nations, whereas the Lord himself cares for Israel."

³⁶ For a full treatment of the matter, see Heiser, Michael S. "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January-March 2001): 52-74.

³⁷ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 114.

them ALL away. He kept one for Himself... at least the beginnings of one. He chose a childless old man who would miraculously father a child with his barren old wife. Through this child (Isaac) He would establish a nation of people that would turn out to be cantankerous, complaining, and unfaithful. It's as if He stacked the deck against Himself (much like when Elijah poured water on the altar before asking God to ignite it!) so that there would be no doubt about who had accomplished this mighty thing.

He promised them a rich land, yet allowed them to be taken into captivity in a foreign nation for hundreds of years before He chose another unlikely fellow (Moses) to lead them out into a wilderness experience that tested their loyalty. While they were there, God reestablished the covenant He had made with Abraham and expanded it to include a system of Laws under which they would live to show that they were set apart from the other nations—that the God they served was Holy.³⁸ The nation of Israel was to be a conduit or mediator through whom the people of other nations could come to God. Nobody could come to God by serving the false gods of the nations. They had to leave their idols and even their land and people behind to become an Israelite (a proselyte) in order to have access to God. They had to come to Him through the sacrificial system surrounding the Tabernacle (later the Temple) and submit themselves to the covenantal laws instead of continuing with the practices of their own nations. This was because Israel was the only nation that was not under the authority of one of the lesser *elohim* and who directly “reported” to God in the hierarchical structure.

Even in his direct shepherding of Israel, God intended for his own nation to be governed by a special group of elders. How many elders were there? Seventy!

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.” Exodus 24:1

As Dr. Heiser explains, the wording suggests that these seventy were drawn from a larger group, just as seventy *elohim* of God’s council were given the special task of stewarding the nations assigned to them.

The correspondences are deliberate. The seventy nations were placed under the dominion of lesser gods in the wake of Yahweh’s judgment of the nations at the Tower of Babel. Yahweh’s own kingdom is structured with a single leader (Moses for now), with whom he speaks directly, and a council of seventy. Historically, this leadership structure would continue into Jesus’ day, as the Jewish Sanhedrin, led by the high priest, numbered seventy... The number telegraphs that, as the kingdom of God is re-established on earth, the seventy nations will be reclaimed, a process that began with the ministry of Jesus and will continue to the end of days.³⁹

³⁸ Another avenue of thought that we do not have time to develop involves the presence of the divine council at the confirmation of the Sinai covenant. In the Ancient Near East, the gods were seen as the “third party” witnesses who enforced covenants. “The witnesses were exclusively deities or deified elements of the natural world... All gods relevant to both parties were called upon as witnesses, so that there was no god left that the vassal could appeal to for protection if he wanted to violate his solemn oath.” George Mendenhall and Gary Herion, “Covenant,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1181. With ancient covenantal practices in mind when we think of Sinai, we can make better sense of Exodus 24:1-11 (strange rituals and a sighting of God) and Hebrews 2:1-4 (“the word spoken through angels was binding”).

³⁹ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 157. From the corresponding footnote on the same page, “The number of the nations in Genesis reflects the known world at the time the biblical writers produced the Bible. When the Church

The Failure of the Sons of God

The seventy who were given authority over the nations were also given power and a measure of freedom to accomplish their roles in their own ways. We do not know what their spiritual status was at first, but it is evident that they became corrupted and began to receive worship from people. This brings us to **Psalm 82**, which proves to be shocking in its directness about everything we have been discussing.

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”

Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!
Psalm 82

In the first verse, we find the word *elohim* twice. The first instance is singular in the Hebrew and the second one is plural.⁴⁰ This is why the first one should be understood as Yahweh and the second one as His council.

You will surely wonder how such a passage is interpreted by those who do not hold to the plain meaning of what is written. Some would say that God is talking to the other members of the Trinity, but that view actually results in heresy because the ones God is talking to are being judged for corruption.

Others argue that the gods here are human Jewish authorities who ruled unjustly.⁴¹ This view has problems, too. First, Scripture never teaches that Jewish leaders would have authority over the other nations,⁴² and verse 8 shows that the conclusion of this matter will happen when God takes back all the nations.

Secondly, it ignores other clear passages in which God has an assembly (or council) of spirit

inherits the promises of Abraham and Jesus sends out the seventy (Luke 10:1), and then all believers in the Great Commission, the language of reclaiming the nations becomes more encompassing. In our day, the messaging is the same: All nations belong to Yahweh; the dominions of darkness will be broken.”

⁴⁰ “In Psalm 82:1, the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verbal form (‘stands’). The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it (‘in the midst of’) requires more than one. You can’t be ‘in the midst of’ one.” Heiser, page 26-27.

⁴¹ Even the words sometimes used to translate *elohim* into English show an attempt to obscure the use of the word. “God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers.” (NASB) “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the ‘gods.’” (The NIV puts it in quotation marks.)

⁴² Some sources, such as the *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2012) notes for Psalm 82:1-4, say that it could be human Gentile rulers governing the land of Israel. Once again, this does not account for the conclusion that God will one day inherit the nations. Why talk about the nations if the passage is localized to Israel?

beings. Here is one example:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? Psalm 89:5-7

Notice from that passage where these heavenly beings gather in their assembly: in the skies. This clearly spells out the Israelite understanding of the divine council and what they would have been thinking when they read **Psalm 82**.

Thirdly, God is pronouncing a judgment on these formerly immortal *elohim* for their injustice to the weak and their partiality to the wicked. He tells them in verses 6-7 that they are gods, sons of the Most High, yet now they are going to die like men (or become mortal).⁴³ It makes no sense at all for God to be telling men that their punishment is that they will die like men.⁴⁴

To summarize what is happening in **Psalm 82**, God has gathered the divine beings who were given authority over the nations He disinherited. He's unhappy with them because He gave them an opportunity to govern in righteousness, but they have chosen instead to lead the nations away from the Most High. Not only will their rule end when God reclaims the nations for Himself, but the disobedient *elohim* who once were immortal are now subject to death along with mankind. Note that as of the declaration of this Psalm, Yahweh was not in possession of the nations, but spoke of one day adding them to His inheritance.

Now that we have set up the historical situation in which God gave away the nations to members of his spiritual family council, we'll turn our attention in the next lesson to some very important implications, both for the nation of Israel and for us as God's human family.

⁴³ This does not mean that God values His spiritual children more than His human children, but the punishment for rebellious beings is separation from God through death and hell.

⁴⁴ While this interpretation of Psalm 82 (and Jesus' usage of it in John 10) is my strong conclusion because I believe it is the most coherent explanation of why they tried to kill Him for blasphemy, very little commentary support is available. It should be noted that most commentators conclude that the gods of Psalm 82 are humans. Heiser addresses their objections in "Jesus' Quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34: A Different View of John's Theological Strategy." (*Michael S. Heiser: The Naked Bible*, 2012.) <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/Heiser%20Psa82inJohn10%20RegSBL2011.pdf> John Piper is one teacher who agrees that Psalm 82 is talking about spiritual beings. ("Putting the gods in Their Place." 13 April 1994. Desiring God. <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/putting-the-gods-in-their-place>) One mainstream point of view that has merit is that Psalm 82 is talking about humans to whom God has given astounding titles and authority, so in John 10, Jesus is showing the Jews that their own Scriptures allow for men to be given God-like ascriptions. I still think it misses the point.