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Use of the Word Elohim

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Abstract: This article explains the etymology and forms of the name Elohim.

USE OF THE WORD ELOHIM.

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Two words, *El*, of which *Elim* was the plural form, and *Eloah*, of which *Elohim* was the plural, were applied generally to Deity by the Hebrew people. All these forms are found in the other Semitic languages, and are, therefore, very ancient in origin.

Under severest discipline the people of Israel were educated in the school of monotheism, in order that God's nature might be revealed to man, and in order that unity might be introduced into the moral life of man. Under this discipline, the people of Israel must have learned to apply the plural form *Elohim*, which their fathers had used of Deity, in speaking of the one God whom they had been taught to serve.

The Hebrew language would allow them to do this, for a few nouns, when used by them in the plural, seemed to magnify the original idea. In such cases the plural form was treated grammatically as singular. An example may be found in Job 40: 15, where the plural form behemoth is used to intensify the image of the animal there being described, as is shown by context. In the same verse, the behemoth is referred to by the singular pronoun he.

But the use of *Elohim*, in this sense, by the later writers of Israel, is not necessarily opposed to the view that in the earliest documents or writings which the Hebrews possessed, it was applied to a plurality of Gods.

The objection to this view has been made that, with the plural form *Elohim*, in Gen. i, the singular verb is used. Such a use of a singular predicate with a plural subject is, however, com-

mon in Hebrew. On page 111 of *Harper's Hebrew Syntax* we find the following rule covering the case, viz.: "When the predicate precedes the subject it may agree with the subject in number or it may assume the *primary form*, viz.: third masculine singular, whatever be the number of the following subject." So the plural form *Elohim* after a singular verb, the construction found in Gen. i, and elsewhere, is no proof that it is singular in any sense. Similar constructions are found with other words in Gen. i: 14, where the singular of the verb *haya*, be, is followed by the plural noun *meoroth*, lights; in Gen. xli: 50, where the singular verb *yul-lodh*, was born, is followed by the plural noun *sheney banim*, two sons; in Job xlii: 15, where the singular verb *nimtsa*, was found, is followed by the plural noun *nashim*, women. Many similar examples might be given to illustrate the rule.

That *Elohim* was used in the plural sense in Gen. i, is shown in the 26th verse, where the *Elohim* in referring to themselves use the plural suffix, *nu*, our, twice; and they also use the plural form of the verb *naaseh*, let us make. Also in Gen. xi: 7, where *nerd-hah*, let us descend, and *nabhlah*, let us confuse, two verbs in the plural form, proceed from the mouth of God. In Gen. iii: 5, the plural construct participle, *yodhe*, knowers of, modifies the noun, *Elohim*, which therefore is also plural. It is just possible that this participle is predicated of the subject you, but the participle would then follow the finite verb, giving a very unusual construction for the early Hebrew writers. One such construction is, however, found in Gen. iv: 17, "he became (one) building a city."

The thought of the possibility of God's having with him great associates was alive even to the time of Isaiah, as is shown in Isaiah vi: 8, where Jehovah said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" Jehovah was a personal name applied to the Being who guided Israel, and afterwards lived on the earth as Jesus Christ. (III Nephi, xv: 5, Doc and Cov. sec. 110.) Probably few of the Jews were ever able to distinguish Jehovah from *Elohim*, as it was latterly used, i. e. in the singular sense, and so when late writers wrote down the portion of Genesis where the name of Jehovah began to be used, they placed next to it, for the same purpose for which we now place the marginal reading, the word *Elohim*. So we have in Gen. ii: 4; iii: 24, and in some other places, the

expression *Jehovah Elohim*, translated the Lord God. The words were put together late in Israel's history when *Elohim* had come to be used in the singular; *Jehovah Elohim* meant Jehovah, i. e. God. Later the explanatory use of the word *Elohim* was forgotten, and the two words combined to apply to God. (See page 219 of *Brown's Hebrew Lexicon*, the most authoritative lexicon in English, for the above explanation.)

The use of the singular noun *Eloah* is almost confined to poetry. It is used in Psalm xviii and in Deut. xxxii. There is ground for saying that the Savior on the cross in crying out to His Father, used the singular form *Eloah*. In combining *Eloah* with the suffix *i*, meaning my, and expressing the result in Greek the h would be dropped, for there is no letter h in the Greek alphabet. A, which was merely introduced to assist the Hebrew to pronounce the h, would also be dropped. The result would give us *Eloi*, the form given in the basic gospel, in Mark xv: 34. (See also Judges v: 5, of the Septuagint).

In the year 1830, we find Joseph Smith, in the face of the tradition of the whole world, daring to render the word *Elohim* in Gen. i, et seq., in the plural. It is one great evidence of the divinity of the Church of Jesus Christ restored in these last days that its prophet said many things, in the day in which he lived, that a progressive people are beginning to appreciate as true; and so we find learned men sympathizing with the daring position taken above. With reference to Gen. i: 26, and similar passages, we find as one explanation in the lexicon mentioned above, a lexicon based on the work of Gesenius, the great German Hebrew scholar, that God was in consultation with angels, our prophet's explanation exactly. In conclusion I shall quote the words of the great Biblical scholar, the Rev. A. B. Davidson of Edinburgh in explanation of the same: "The use of 'us' by the divine speaker (Gen. i: 26, iii: 22, xi: 17) is strange, but is perhaps due to his consciousness of being surrounded by other beings of a loftier order than men (Is. vi: 8). (See *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*, page 205)