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An Explanation of the Plural Form of God's Name¹

Abstract:

God's name "Elohim," common in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition, is always used with verbs in the singular even though it is in the plural form. It is shown here that the ungrammatical usage can be seen as the best solution to a natural problem. Namely, tradition assumes that it should be impossible to talk about a general category of gods within which the one God could be located. The best and perhaps the only way to prevent the implicit pluralization of the unique God is to put his name in plural even though it is intended to be used as if it were singular. One cannot form the plural form of the name that is already grammatically plural! Surprisingly, this explanation seems to have been considered by neither classical nor modern commentators.

Keywords:

Elohim, God's name, Hebrew Bible, Judaism, Biblical criticism, Jewish philosophy

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“In the 1970s, I had the privilege to be a student of Meir Weiss. ...Weiss followed Buber and Rosenzweig in that he did not separate form and content: The form expressed the content.”

(Ephraim Meir)²

1 The Problem

A reader of the Bible in its original form cannot but be puzzled by the most often used general Hebrew name for God – the general one, as opposed to the proper four-letter Name to which Jews refer to as *Hashem*. The name *Elohim* occurs in the first verse of the Torah (Pentateuch), and then is used continuously in Scripture and in the entire Jewish tradition. It is retained in the practical fulfillment of the Torah in the numerous blessings that are said every day by practicing Jews. They are so used to it that they do not ask the question why this peculiar form is the principal way of referring to the Creator. Why are not other forms of this name used, the ones in the singular, like *El* or *Eloah*, Semitic nouns obviously related to the name *Allah*? To make the matter even more confusing the same term *elohim* is used to refer to pagan deities or great earthly powers (and the issue is even more acute since in Hebrew one cannot spell it with a lower case letter), as in Exodus 12:12, where it is stated that “I will execute judgments against all Egyptian gods,” *elohei mizraim*, or in Exodus 18:11, where it is said that Hashem is greater than all gods, *mikol haelohim*, or in the Decalogue, in Exodus 20:3, where it is forbidden to have *elohim acherim*, “other gods before Me.” In Psalm 97 we read that Hashem is exalted far above “all gods,” *al kol elohim*. So exactly the same term is used for both the one God and the multitude of false deities. Why?

Of course, the problem is well known. Maimonides (12th century) notes that “every Hebrew knows that the term *Elohim* is a homonym, and denotes God, angels, judges, and the rulers of countries.”³ To ask the naïve question, “why?,” and to try to give a (seemingly) new answer may seem hopeless and arrogant. It may seem hopeless because so many commentators must have asked the question; and extremely immodest because a proper handling of the issue requires competence in several disciplines: Torah learning (broadly conceived), academic study of the Bible, and knowledge of the Hebrew language and its history. I claim expertise in none of these disciplines. It is quite possible that my answer has been already formulated. However, even if it appears somewhere, it is not known to a wider public.

Let me also say that whereas linguistic clarifications of the general name of God exist, I focus here on philosophical and theological answers. Still, a few linguistic remarks need to be made. Some people say that other Hebrew words exist with the ending *-im* (or *-ayim*) that are *de facto* singular rather than plural (or dual); for example, *chayim*. The point is, however, that we use it consistently in the plural: long life = *chayim arukim*. Similarly, there are mass words, like *mayim*, that have a plural form; they are also used with adjectives and verbs in plural: pure water = *mayim tehorim*, *hamayim hem tehorim*; water purifies = *hamaim metaharim*. Also, in other cases, like glasses = *mishkafaim*, there is consistency. In addition, place names exist with dual ending indicating one locality; for example, *Machanayim*. The name suggests some duality within one entity, which is, by the way, precisely what we want to avoid in the intended meaning of *Elohim*. Also, the name of Jerusalem has this form; we say *Yerushalaim yafah* = Jerusalem is beautiful; Jerusalem may possibly be a special case as it

2) Ephraim Meir, *Interreligious Theology: Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, Jerusalem: De Gruyter, Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2015), 107.

3) Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Friedlander, 1904, Part I, Chapter II; quoted after “en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Guide_for_the_Perplexed_(Friedlander)/Part_I#CHAPTER_II”

can be also spelled *Yerushalem* (יְרוּשָׁלַם rather than יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) with no plurality involved in the name. Anyway, in general no grammatical inconsistency occurs in all those cases. And this is clearly in contradistinction to the way the term *Elohim* is employed.

The main feature of the Biblical and later Jewish use of the name *Elohim* is its juxtaposition with verbs and adjectives in singular, almost never plural. It is so clear from the very beginning of the Bible (*Bereshit bara Elohim*) that it is hard to believe it has no special meaning. Yet no good explanation has been offered by commentators. The famous commentator Rashi (11th century) comments extensively on the initial verse of the Torah but says nothing on the fact that name of God is in plural and the verb is in singular. Apparently, it seemed natural to him and his intended readers. Or else, he did not know how to explain that, and preferred not to mention the problem. For sure he did not try to make us see it as meant to convey something significant. But is this really enough? If not, what is the message of this strange collocation?

2 The Attempts to Explain

To approach the issue from a philosophical angle I will use as a point of departure the remarks by Hermann Cohen, the dean of modern Jewish philosophers, found in his last book *Religion der Vernunft aus dem Quellen des Judentums*. In Chapter I, Point 6, on God's uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*) he addresses the problem, calling it "an almost insoluble riddle." The joining of the singular forms of the adjective with the plural noun "is a psychological riddle" that is "a logical monster that cannot exist."⁴ This must have been not a small worry for Cohen. As Steven Schwarzschild reports, Cohen would always say: "One has to square away one's philology before doing one's philosophy," which according to Franz Rosenzweig sounded "*das Philologische muss immer in Ordnung sein*."⁵ So what is Cohen's solution?

His first comment is based on (imagined) history: "The routine explanation is that this name of God preserves the traces of an original polytheism."⁶ This refers to his (scientific) presentation of historical progress, "the stages of the development within the monotheistic concept of God."⁷ This approach is not surprising if we remember that for several years Julius Wellhausen, one of the originators of the documentary hypothesis, was Cohen's colleague in Marburg. To me the idea that the plural form of God's name is "a residue of polytheism" is not convincing. Why was it not expressed in another form? And even if it was a remnant why was it retained by later generations in religious texts and practice? Cohen himself seems to feel that the concept of the residue is not sufficient; this is the way I understand his remark that this approach "is unable to do justice to the problem of the style of a national spirit in its historical development."⁸

Cohen writes a few lines later that the intention of this word in the plural form could not be plurality. So why was the form *Elohim* retained? Well, "the new God was thought of as a unity, with such energy and clarity that the grammatical plural form could not impair this new content of thought."⁹ Is this principle of a monotheistic clarity convincing enough? Cohen finds it suitable to reinforce the point: "On the contrary, the preservation of the plural form testifies to the vigor of the new thought, which simply took no offense at all at

4) Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 38.

5) Steven Schwarzschild, "The Title of Herman Cohen's 'Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism,'" in Cohen *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, 8.

6) Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, 38.

7) Ibid.

8) Ibid.

9) Ibid.

the plural form.”¹⁰ This can be a correct description of our standard understanding of the matter that has been present for many centuries. The problem is that it assumes that a flaw remained, one that has become irrelevant or at least innocuous. Yet even scientifically minded people usually do not choose this approach when the Torah is interpreted. For philosophers open to theology, the rabbinic method seems likely to be more fruitful. According to it, each Biblical formulation is seen as essential and expressing important insights. That it is to say, form and content go together.

To sum up, Cohen’s efforts bring questionable results. Despite his claim that the matter has been explained, what remains from his remarks as the strongest message is his lament that the issue is an “insoluble riddle.” His philology is not “in Ordnung.”

No other attempt seems better. I assume that if there had been a clear traditional explanation before 1000 CE, Rashi would have included it. If later commentators had proposed a cogent clarification, Cohen would have mentioned it. Turning to modern rabbinic commentaries, we can consult, for example, the notes by the pre-World War II Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth Joseph Hertz who wrote that the name *Elohim* “indicates that God comprehends and unifies all the forces of eternity and infinity.”¹¹ This phrase is quite elegant. However, even if this is a correct reading of the intention, it is not at all clear why the plural form is the way to indicate eternity. Moreover, is this indication so essential that it justifies the risk involved in the inevitable suggestion of some divine plurality?

Other attempts are sometimes made, such as a cultural-linguistic theory that sees the phrase as an application of *pluralis maiestatis*. To indicate majesty through the plural form is used in many Eastern and Western cultures. However here this explanation seems inadequate: *pluralis maiestatis* occurs when a plural pronoun or a verb in plural form is used to refer to a single person of higher stature (“We, the King, declare”). The case we examine is different: the name itself is in the plural, and the associated verbs and pronouns are in the singular form. Perhaps *pluralis maiestatis* can be seen in Gen. 1:26, *naase adam*, “let us make man,” but this is an exception. A few other exceptions exist, such as Gen. 20:13, where Abraham says “*hit’u oti Elohim*,” “God caused me to wander.” Hertz comments, “the verb is in the plural, which is sometimes used when an Israelite speaks to a heathen.”¹² The exceptions are extremely rare. The ungrammatical combination of the plural name and singular verb is the rule.

Nothing I have seen as an explanation has a convincing enough case. The problem remains how to interpret the form of the name *Elohim* while treating it as saying something important, not coincidentally but precisely because of having the form it has. The proper name is better precisely because it expresses a key insight by utilizing this form rather than by using a more predictable variety, like *El* or *Eloah*. I do not mean the standard Christian claim that the plurality in the name indicates Trinity. Is a Jewish interpretation, or a generally acceptable Biblical one, possible that would be at least as sensible, and preferably more convincing, than the Christian claim?

3 The Explanation

When I express the hope of identifying a message contained in the form of the name *Elohim* I do not imply that this should be a novel message, or that it should be unknown, or surprising. To expect so much would be irresponsible. The message should be clear and powerful, but its contents can hardly be anything other than one of the familiar well-known principles of (Biblical) faith.

10) Ibid.

11) Joseph H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1981), 2.

12) Ibid., 71.

In order to find the message, let us recall that the other principal name, *Hashem*, is also used in the first chapters of Genesis and then all the time throughout Scripture, as well as in the tradition and in Jewish prayers and blessings. It is used as a proper name. No generalization, no picture of many similar entities is possible on the basis of this name. The Name “*yud-hay-vav-hay*” has many traditional interpretations, but it is always consistent with the supposition of the uniqueness of God, his incomparability. The Tetragrammaton can indicate absolute transcendence. And it can have no other grammatical form than the one it actually has. In particular, no plural usage is possible.

In contrast to the Tetragrammaton, the name *Elohim* looks like a common name. It can be put side by side with other names. Its very form, as we know, suggests plurality, and is actually used in the Bible to refer to the multitude of pagan gods, spirits, or other powers. Can it be used in a way that does express the uniqueness and transcendence of (the true) God so that no plurality, general category (of gods) can be attached to it? Yes, it can. Common names can be generalized, that is, can be put in the plural form to suggest the existence of many similar entities. There is, however, one exception: when the name is already in the plural form! One must not say “*Elohimim*” (which would be the attempted Hebrew plural form of *Elohim*)!

If the term *Eloah* or another name in the singular had been systematically used, then the very possibility of a plural form of this name would have introduced the vision of many entities of this category. The plural form combined with singular verbs and adjectives avoids generalization, forbids real plurality, and thereby expresses transcendence. The fundamental message, contained also in the word “*echad*”, or “one,” in the *Shema* prayer – called sometimes the Jewish credo (literally, “Hear, O Israel, Hashem our God, Hashem one”), that is uniqueness, incomparability, transcendence, is expressed here by the very form of God's name. Whereas the message is expected, the carrier of the message is not: after all, it is a standard Semitic name for deity. Making it plural and ungrammatically connected with verbs and adjectives suddenly transforms it; it can carry the message. And this message can, in principle, reach everyone who notices the grammatical peculiarity present from the very first verse of the Torah.

Unlike the other explanations of the form of the name *Elohim*, this one provides justification for itself. The price to be paid because of the misleading suggestion of plurality in this name is worth paying. This was not the case with the other purported explanations: the remnant of the polytheistic usage; a monotheistic clarity and certainty; the embracement of eternity and totality; let alone *pluralis maiestatis*. Now the price is worth paying because at a deeper level the message directly opposes the superficial suggestion of plurality. It is one of the most fundamental messages of the Jewish Scripture as we have come to understand it.

4 Additional Remarks

Thus, the incomparability of God, the lack of a general category to which He can be assigned, is indirectly stated due to a grammatical device. The same message of God's uniqueness was expressed by Hermann Cohen in his treatise, and actually in the very chapter dealing with the problem of the plural form of the name *Elohim*. The philosopher did not attempt the explanation proposed here, even though he clearly liked this kind of philosophical or rabbinic elucidation. In fact, what I propose here is similar to a common inference in idealistic philosophy, within which Cohen was operating. Namely, the plural form of God's name appears to be necessary, given some assumptions. If not necessary, it seems at least to be the best solution to the challenge of how to eliminate the possibility of placing God on the same level as pagan gods. It would not be enough to solve the problem by using exclusively God's proper (four letter) Name. And here, I do not mean the documentary and source hypotheses. After all, when operating within the Jewish tradition it is crucial to be able to say something like “*Hashem hu haElohim*,” or “Hashem is (the true) God.” Because no common name would be protected

against being in the plural, indicating a general category to which God belongs, the only solution is to have the name already in the plural form. Then the semblance of polytheism is overcome by the inability to generalize due to the non-existence of the plural form. It is a grammatical protection of God's uniqueness, or rather, it is the ungrammaticality of a phrase like "*Elohim bara*" ("God created") that conveys the message.

Perhaps another solution is possible, but I do not see it. Anyway, it is rather surprising to me that the issue has not been analyzed in a vein similar to mine by philosophers and rabbis who accept the message of God's uniqueness, incomparability, and transcendence. This vision of God has been the established view for a long time, even though other opinions seem to have been common in ancient times, and to some extent in the Middle Ages. We are all heirs of Maimonides who emphasized God's uniqueness, "*hu yachid*." I am puzzled why he or later philosophers, Hermann Cohen in particular, have not proposed something along the lines of the present paper. If it is because my explanation involves a flaw that I am unable to perceive, then I hope to be corrected soon.

The explanation proposed here seems to have consequences for Biblical translations. Beginning with the Septuagint, the term *Elohim* has always been translated, in the appropriate language, as "God." Ephraim Meir has written many times about the celebrated Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible. He stated that their "sensibility for the original word brought a change of perspective in the hearers of the Biblical word."¹³ If the interpretation contained in this paper is correct, the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible would be even better if rather than beginning with "*Im Anfang schuf Gott den Himmel und die Erde*" it would read "*Im Anfang schuf Götter den Himmel und die Erde*."

While the same construction can be made in many other languages it is hard to render the same idea in English: "Gods created" would be grammatical and because of this completely misleading. One way out would be to use present tense. Then the Jewish Theological Seminary of America translation "When God began to create the heaven and the earth" could perhaps be modified to "When in the beginning Gods creates the heaven and the earth." Whatever the translation might be, it seems that the field of Biblical translation is far from completed. How can it be otherwise if, as Ephraim Meir reminds us approvingly quoting Buber, "Tanakh is not *biblia*, books, but *miqra*, a living word..."¹⁴

13) Ephraim Meir, *Becoming Interreligious: Towards a Dialogical Theology from a Jewish Vantage Point* (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2017), 167.

14) Meir, *Interreligious Theology*, 86. *Tanakh* is the Hebrew name for the Bible; *miqra* suggests the act of reading, and, given the traditional liturgy, reading aloud.

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