The Hebrew word that is translated as “God” in the Old Testament is elohim and theos in the Greek New Testament. These words have different nuances than our modern vocabulary for God/god, so unfortunately, we often misunderstand what the Bible is telling us about spiritual beings. These study notes are primarily a Hebrew and Greek word study about the biblical vocabulary for god/God.

SECTION 1

Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning elohim created the skies and the land.”

1. The Hebrew word elohim is the most common Hebrew term for god/deity, but it is not the only word! Rather, it is a lengthened, plural form of the ancient Semitic word for deity, which is el. This semitic word is not a name, but a title that describes a type of being, namely, an inhabitant of the spiritual realm. The word occurs in multiple forms in biblical Hebrew.

a. “el” (אל occurs some 235x), “deity, divine being”

i. The noun likely derives from a proto-Semitic verb 'uwl (עול), meaning “to be strong.” (see Koehler-Baumgartner, Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament)

ii. Canaanite texts use the word el to refer to a distinct deity who resides on the sacred mountain north of Canaan and is the chief of the other gods and master of the pantheon. He also bears the title malk, or king. In the Ugaritic texts (northern Canaanite), el is depicted as an aged deity with a gray beard and called “father of humanity” (ʼab ʼadam).

iii. This short form can have a plural ending elim, meaning deities in the Hebrew Bible. “Sons of elim” refers to members of the gods/pantheon. See Psalm 29:1; 89:7 referring to the divine council.

vi. The word el referred to a chief deity in Canaanite religion, and it seems that the Israelites adopted this term to describe Yahweh, the el they came to know in the story of Abraham, the Exodus, and at Mount Sinai. This idea is attested in numerous phrases that preserve an old use of ʼel as a proper name. See Table
b. An alternate short form: eloah (אלה used 57x in biblical Hebrew) = “deity, divine being”: This is a composite word, made up of two syllables: el + ah, which passed into Arabic as Allah.

i. eloah is a title for Yahweh, used most frequently in Job (41x), along with El (55x) and Shadday (“powerful one” 31x).

ii. eloah is synonymous with elohim and other divine titles in the Hebrew Bible. They all refer to Yahweh most often.

Notice the parallel between Psalm 18:32 “Who is eloah but Yahweh,” and 2 Samuel 22:32, “Who is el but Yahweh.”

c. The long forms, elohim = eloah + the plural ending -im, used around 2,750x in the Hebrew Bible. This is by far the most common term for Yahweh in the Old Testament.

2. The form elohim is technically plural (the -im is the normal plural ending for nouns) and can be used (1) in the plural sense for “gods” and also (2) to refer to the one God of Israel.

a. The word’s plural meaning refers to the deities worshiped by the nations around Israel. SEE TABLE 2A

b. The plural noun elohim can also have a singular meaning, referring to a deity worshipped by Israel’s neighbors. SEE TABLE 2B

c. The “plural of majesty” is a grammatical term used by Hebrew scholars to describe how a singular entity that is intense or large can be referred to with a plural noun. See Paul Jouon & T. Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, section 136d.

i. “Wisdom (חכמות = lit. “wisdoms”) calls out (singular verb) in the streets” (Proverbs 1:20) and “Wisdom(s) builds her house” (Proverbs 9:1).

d. This use of the plural elohim to refer to one particular deity is also found in other Canaanite and Mesopotamian texts, as in the Amarna letters, where Pharaoh is addressed by his Canaanite subjects as “my gods.” See the Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible, entry “elohim” for references.

3. The Point: The Hebrew word elohim can refer to spiritual beings in addition to the one elohim worshipped by Israel.

a. The patron deities of other nations:

<table>
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<th>Table 2A</th>
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<tr>
<td>The 1st commandment: “You shall have no other elohim before me”</td>
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<tr>
<td>EXODUS 20:3</td>
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<tr>
<td>“the elohim of Egypt.”</td>
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<td>EXODUS 12:12</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2B</th>
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<tr>
<td>Can refer to the deity of another nation: “Chemosh the elohim of Moab”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 KINGS 11: 33</td>
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<tr>
<td>elohim created (3rd masc. Singular verb), usually refers to Yahweh, the God of Israel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>GENESIS 1:1</td>
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<tr>
<th>&quot;the elohim of Egypt&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Foreign elohim&quot; = gods of other nations (&quot;Manasseh removed the foreign elohim&quot;)</th>
<th>The Israelites sacrificed to demons that are not eloah, elohim that they had not previously known.</th>
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<tr>
<td>EXODUS 12:12</td>
<td>2 CHRONICLES 33:15</td>
<td>DEUTERONOMY 32:17</td>
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b. 1 Samuel 28:12-13: Saul has a spirit-medium conjure up the presence of the deceased Samuel. “And the woman saw Samuel, and she cried out...and said, ‘I see a elohim rising up from the ground.”

i. This refers to a human who exists apart from their body. This is not saying Samuel is “God” or a “god.” Rather, the world elohim apparently refers to the mode of existence: a member of the non-physical, spirit realm.

c. The later biblical authors developed more specific vocabulary to talk about these beings to more clearly distinguish between them as elohim and the one elohim: Angel, demon, spirits, etc...

SECTION 2

The Implications of this word study

1. Yahweh is an elohim, but not the only elohim (spiritual being). He is the most powerful and authoritative, and he alone is the creator of all things, including the other elohim.

For Yahweh your elohim, he is the elohim of elohim, and the lord of lords, the great and mighty and awesome.
DEUTERONOMY 10:17

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons that are not eloah, elohim that they had not previously known.
DEUTERONOMY 32:17

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.
1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6

a. When Paul says that there “is no such thing as an idol,” he is saying that the statue itself is not an elohim (or, in Greek, a theos). But he is not denying that there are in fact other spiritual beings that people worship, and to describe them he uses the term theos, gods.

SECTION 3

The challenge of the terms monotheism and polytheism.

1. This biblical portrait of a populated spiritual universe is sometimes thought to contradict the concept of monotheism, the belief that there is only one God. This problem is caused by our English word G/god, which has two meanings.
SECTION 3 CONTINUED

a. “God” with a capital “g” refers to the one, all-powerful creator deity referred to in the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

b. “god” with a lower case “g” refers to a deity of lesser status or power.

2. The real problem is that English speakers use one word (G/god) to refer to both of these spiritual beings. While the distinction between the Creator God and all other gods is maintained by the spelling convention of using capital or lowercase letters, it can still cause confusion.

3. For the biblical authors, there is no tension in calling Yahweh the Creator an elohim while also using that word to describe the spiritual beings that were created by Yahweh. They are all elohim, that is, inhabitants of the spiritual realm.

4. Some people mistake the biblical idea that there are many elohim with the concept of “Polytheism.” This is an easy mistake, but it’s incorrect. In academic religious studies, polytheism refers to religious worldviews that believe that the spiritual realm of many deities rival one another for status and power (think of the classic pantheon of Greek gods on Mount Olympus). This is not at all the same as biblical monotheism, which claims that only Yahweh is creator and ruler of all things, including the other elohim.

SECTION 4

What about “no other god” passages of the Bible?

1. There is a common phrase in the Hebrew Bible where God says “there is none besides me” or “no God but me.”

<table>
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<th>NIV</th>
<th>Literal Hebrew</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You were shown these things so that you might know that <strong>the LORD is God</strong>: besides him there is no other. <strong>Deuteronomy 4:35</strong></td>
<td>...know that Yahweh, he is <strong>the elohim, there is not another except for him</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Know and take to heart today, that <strong>the LORD is God</strong> in heaven above and on earth below. <strong>There is no other.</strong> <strong>Deuteronomy 4:39</strong></td>
<td>...Yahweh is <strong>the elohim</strong> in heaven above and on earth below, <strong>not another</strong>.</td>
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Observations on “no other gods” passages of the Bible

a. In these passages, elohim has the Hebrew word “the” attached (ha-elohim), which means the claim being made is that Yahweh alone is **the chief God**, not that Yahweh is the only elohim that exists.
b. All of these “no other god” passages are found in contexts that explicitly assert the existence of other spiritual beings.

“\textit{And not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.}"

\textit{Deuteronomy 4:19}

c. The phrase “no other” or “there is no other” is not referring to existence, but to comparability within a category.

The identical phrase is used in Isaiah 47, to describe the arrogance of the leaders of Babylon.

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You [Babylon] say to yourself: "I am, and there is no one besides me"
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\textit{Isaiah 47:8}

The claim is not “no other ancient cities exist.” Rather, the claim is "no other ancient cities compare with the status and power of Babylon”

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\textbf{SECTION 4 CONTINUED}
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d. “A close reading of these passages in Deuteronomy and Isaiah shows... that the denials are not claiming that other \(\text{אֱלֹהִים} \) (elohim) do not exist, but that Yahweh’s has unique and incomparable qualities in relation to other gods: Yahweh’s pre-existence, his role as creator of all things, including other elohim, his ability to save, and national deliverance. The focus is on Yahweh’s incomparable status and the impotence of the other gods. It would be empty praise to compare Yahweh to beings that did not exist. The biblical authors assume they do exist, but that they are “nothing” compared to Yahweh.”

\textit{Michael Heiser, “The Divine Council,” The Lexham Bible Dictionary}

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\textbf{SECTION 5}
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\textbf{What about biblical texts that deny the reality of idol-gods?}

1. There are many biblical texts that mock the ancient practice of worshiping gods that are represented by idols. In these texts, the authors claim that these statues are “nothing.”

2. For similar texts see Psalm 135:15-18; Jeremiah 10:1-6; Isaiah 44:9-20

3. These passages are sarcastically lampooning idol statues as such. They’re mocking the concept that an inanimate statue could be confused for a spiritual being that is very real. These texts are not an argument about the non-existence of other spiritual beings.

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\textit{Our elohim is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, The work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see; They have ears, but they cannot hear; They have noses, but they cannot smell; They have hands, but they cannot feel; They have feet, but they cannot walk; They cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, Everyone who trusts in them.}"

\textit{Psalm 115}
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4. The distinction between idol-gods and spiritual beings is made explicit in Paul’s warnings to the Corinthians that they stop attending ritual meals at idol temples.

> Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are gods spoken of, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods. For even if there are gods spoken of, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods. Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6

**Observations on 1 Corinthians 8:4-6**

a. Paul’s claim here is that idol-statues are not spiritual beings (he uses the term theos the Greek word for “deity”). But he quickly qualifies what he means, by saying that, of course, there are many spiritual beings.

b. Paul’s concern is that in going to the local idol temples, the people will unwittingly end up under the influence of corrupt spiritual powers, as he says later in 1 Corinthians 10.

> Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:19-20

**Observations on 1 Corinthians 10:19-20**

a. Paul uses the Greek word daimonion to refer to evil spiritual beings. This word was a normal term to refer to lower-level deities and spiritual beings. Paul is very clear that to deny the reality of idol-gods is not the same as denying the existence of other gods, that is, other spiritual beings.
The words for deity in the Bible (Hebrew *elohim* / Greek *theos*) are category titles that can refer to any being that exists in the spiritual realm. This is why they can be used to refer to the one God of Israel (God) and also the deities worshiped by other nations (gods).

The biblical authors do, however, use this title in ways similar to how we use proper names. Just as siblings can use the title Mom to refer to their particular mom, the biblical authors will often use the word *elohim* to refer to Yahweh. They can do so because the biblical texts were written by, to, and for tight-knit religious communities that shared a common understanding of who these words referred to.

The biblical authors do believe that there is only one, chief *elohim/theos* who is revealed in the story of Israel's scriptures and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That *elohim* is named Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible and called Father in the New Testament.

The biblical authors do not portray the other spiritual beings as rivals to the one, Creator God. Rather, they exist in a realm that is parallel to the earthly realm, where some are loyal and others have become rebels. We will explore the concept of spiritual rebels later in our Spiritual Beings series, in episodes four and six, The Divine Council and The Satan and Demons.