7-2008

Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?

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Deuteronomy 32.17 reads as follows in the MT (BHS):

בּוֹת הַלְוִי־תִּוְּתִי לֹא־אֲלֵיָּהוּ לָא דְּרֵעָה הָעֲשָׂים מְקוֹרֵב בְּאֵשׁ לַשׁוֹעַר אָבִיתךָ

English translations reflect disagreement over primarily two issues: whether to render ֶלְוִי־תִּוְּתִי as singular or plural and how to translate the verbless clause in which it appears, יָמָןָן. English translations illustrate the divergence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Hebrew Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods whom they have not known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods whom they had never known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJPS</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, to gods they had never known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to deities they had never known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>&quot;They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known...&quot;</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The first three translations render יָמָןָן as plural ("gods"), while the other four opt for a singular translation. It is not difficult to see that the translators that have

1 The range of these issues is demonstrated in great detail in Paul Sanders, The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).
3 NJPS has "Gods" capitalized because it is the first word of the new line according to the poetic arrangement used.
Knowing the status of the NASB—and many other translations—has gods in the same verse? The other translations, which take יהוה as singular, do not suffer this tension. In this option, the translation would be something akin to NASB (“They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known...”) or the NRSV (“They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known...”).

A singular translation makes it clear that Israel committed apostasy, but implies that the gods to whom the Israelites sacrificed were real but inferior to the God of Israel. The singular choice identifies the gods as demons (and vice versa); the demon-gods must be conceived of as actual entities, since it is obvious that the biblical worldview included demons. That the text calls these gods demons does not soften the theological implications, since demons (סֵפֶיר) were widely conceived of as deities in the wider Semitic culture of the biblical world. For example, in the Deir ‘Alla texts from Jordan, the Shaddayin are explicitly called סֵפֶיר (“gods”).

Lexical-Semantic considerations

The first issue that needs to be addressed is whether יהוה is more accurately translated as a singular or plural. The word יהוה is a defective spelling of the lemma יהוה. A computer search of the Hebrew Bible reveals that the lemma יהוה occurs fifty-eight times. Two of those occurrences are in Deuteronomy and both are in Deut 32. Aside from Deut 32.17, יהוה is the spelling found in Deut 32.15, where we read that Jeshurun (Israel) “forsook יהוה who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.” The context clearly calls for a singular translation. There was only one “Rock” identified in the narrative of Israel’s spiritual and geographical journey. The referent of the forsaking in Deut 32.16, where YHWH tells Moses that the people “will forsake me and break my covenant.” The verb lemma in 31.16, though, is not the same as in 32.15. The phrase “Rock who made (יהוה) him” heartens back to Deut 32.6, where there is verb lemma agreement.

There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where יהוה is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun. The only place where such an option might appear to be workable is 2 Kgs 17.31, where the text informs us that “the Sepharyvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammeleh and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (יהוה קדש).” The pointing here suggests that the lemma is not יהוה but rather יהוה in a misspelled or archaic plural construct form. That the Qere reading for this form is יהוה argues forcefully that the lemma is not יהוה but rather יהוה. Lexicography therefore offers no support for a plural translation.

In view of this data, one must ask why some translators still favor a plural translation of יהוה in Deut 32.17. There seem to be two possible answers. On the one hand, plural translation conveys the idea that the existence of the gods mentioned in the verse is denied. This choice doesn’t answer why Deut 32.17 also affirms that the demons were gods, regardless of how one translates יהוה. Nevertheless, some might view this option as permissible for theological reasons under the assumption that Scripture denies the reality of other gods and that this idea cannot be contradicted, even by the text itself. This amounts to little more than translating to one’s theological predilections which, if allowed, would quickly cause translation work to devolve into chaos. On the other hand, some translators would choose the plural based upon analogous passages. This approach is based on syntactical parallels to יהוה אל in Deut 32.17.

Syntactical considerations

Setting theological motivations aside, some translators may feel justified by using a plural for יהוה based on other clauses in Deuteronomy and elsewhere where the syntax is analogous to Deut 32.17, but where the noun of deity is יהוה, which is semantically plural in the Hebrew Bible in certain contexts.

Andersen and Forbes chose to characterize יהוה אל in Deut 32.17 as a phrase of “inverted modification” in their syntactical database of the Hebrew Bible. A search of their database for inverted modification that includes a negative particle while requiring the semantic constraint that a noun of deity be present in the phrase produces eleven close matches to what is found in Deut 32.17. One of these is Deut 32.21, which naturally is to be taken in the context of Deut 32 17:

Deut 32.21a

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Deut 32.21a

The words יהוה אל are of importance for our purposes. These words can be taken as a phrase or a verbless clause with supplied predication in English. The phrase option would produce “They made me jealous with a non-god, they provoked me to anger with their vanities.” The verbless clause option could be rendered in two ways: “They made me jealous with what is not a god...” or “They made me jealous with what is not God...” The former of these two verbless clause options and the phrase option before it would create tension between this verse and the singular rendering of יהוה in Deut 32.17 since they would suggest that the objects of Israel’s apostate worship were not truly gods. The remaining alternative (the latter of the two verbless clause options) does not create this tension.

The syntax of Deut 32.21 is closely paralleled in Jer 5.7 and 2 Chr 13.9, where the negative particle is prefixed by a preposition. As with Deut 32.21, the Hebrew words in question can be taken as a phrase without predication in English or as a verbless clause rendered with the English copula. Jeremiah 5.7 (בִּלְיָהוּ אֲנָשָׁא לְיָהוּ אַל בִּלְיָהוּ אֲנָשָׁא (לְיָהוּ אֲנָשָׁא) can be translated as either, “Your children have forsaken me, and they have sworn by non-gods...” or, “Your children have forsaken me, and they have sworn by what are not gods...” The options for 2 Chr 13.9 are similar. The text states (יהוה אֲנָשָׁא that the sons of Aaron and the Levites had been driven out of the land, and in their place were those who “become a priest of non-gods...” or “become a priest of what are not gods.” Of the remaining eight close syntactic matches, five should be translated with the copula as predication since the verbless clause includes a subject pronoun.

2 Kgs 19.18; Isa 37.19 (identical) “They put their gods into the fire, for they were not gods (יהוה אֲנָשָׁא)...”

The apparatus of the BHS notes the following: mit Mas 66אככ כ support at Q תוד, K 66אככ (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: SESB Version [electronic ed.; Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003, c1969/77]).
Jer 2.11 “Has any nation changed its gods though they are not gods (יהוה אלהים)...”

Jer 16.20 “Can a man make for himself gods? They are not gods (יהוה אלהים)...”

Hos 8.6 “a craftsman made it; it is not a god (יהוה אלהים)...”

The last three matches could be translated with or without predication, though refraining from the use of the copula seems most natural. In Isa 31.3 we read, providing precedent for the plural translation in these analogous cases. This circumstance is not true of Deut 32.17, rather than taking this methodology is dubious.

These syntactically analogous examples are interesting, but not compelling with respect to adopting a plural translation for היה ש in the era the lemma in these analogous cases that is translated as a plural is היה ש, not היה. The lemma יהוה אלהים is legitimately translated as a plural in other passages outside these examples, providing precedent for the plural translation in these analogous cases. This circumstance is not true of היה ש, where there is no plural precedent elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The argument from analogy depends on starting with instances where יהוה אלהים is plural and then using that phenomenon to comment on היה ש in Deut 32.17, rather than taking היה ש on its own terms within its own semantic range. This methodology is dubious.

The fundamental question at this juncture is whether or not there is a compelling reason to make certain translation choices to avoid the specter of polytheism. In a way, this takes us back to the issue of theological motivation, but the syntactic parallels are enough for some translators to conclude that the choice is not theologically motivated. But is there really a polytheism problem here? If this difficulty were removed, there would be no perceived difficulty with adopting a singular translation for היה ש.

God and the gods in Deuteronomy

What follows is a brief summary of a much longer treatment of the issue of the reality of other gods in Deuteronomy and the Hebrew Bible. Scholars have noted for some time that Deuteronomy contains several passages that not only assume the existence of other gods, but also have these gods in the service of the God of Israel. Deuteronomy 32.8-9 and its explicit parallel, Deut 4.19-20, have YHWH placing the Gentile nations under the authority of lesser divine beings:

Deut 32.8 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 [יהוה אלהים ובנ]. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

8 Most, if not all, scholars hold that these changes came in the Hellenistic period. This conclusion is guided not by actual data, but by the assumption that Israelite religion was steadily evolving toward an exclusivist monotheism that rejected the existence of other gods after the exile. As this article details, this assumption has significant flaws. In terms of textual data, all that is known for sure is that the Qumran material, the oldest witness to this passage, contained references to other gods, whereas the later text of MT does not. The data says nothing about when the alteration of MT took place. In view of the abundant canonical and non-canonical post-exilic and Hellenistic Jewish material in which the existence of other gods is assumed, it is far more coherent to positulate that these textual changes came much later during the period of textual "standardization" circa 100 C.E. One cannot argue that Hellenistic Judaism in particular considered such "demythologizing" a theological duty, for the LXX is often quite literal in passages where other gods are affirmed e.g., Ps 82.1 [LXX 81.1]; 89.7 [LXX 88.7]). This means that the fact that certain LXX passages do soften language that points to other gods (see the next footnote) indicates only that some Jews felt uncomfortable with divine plurality, not that Judaism as a whole could not process such language in the context of the uniqueness of YHWH. The abundant testimony to divine plurality in a divine council in the Qumran material informs us that even the most conservative sects of Judaism in the first century might not object to the language of divine plurality (see Michael S. Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature" [Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004]; 176-213). The MT rose to prominence only after centuries of textual diversity and not by "innate factors related to the textual transmission, but by political and socioreligious events and developments" (Emanuel Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)", in Anchor Bible Dictionary [ed. D. N. Freedman; N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992], 6407). The social and religious pressures that led to textual standardization in the first century C.E. are a much weaker milieu for these textual changes, and so the theological motivation behind them does not undermine the thesis of this article; it strengthens it.
It is significant that MT lacks the second line, an explicit reference to divine beings (אלהים), in what should be the first bicolon. MT also changes יאכז to יאכז. This alteration seems odd, but the motive becomes clear if יאכז is understood not as "heaven" but as "heavenly beings," a meaning found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars would assert that this original pairing was deliberately altered by the Masoretes to avoid the reference to other gods. This supposition does not explain why other references to plural gods and the heavenly sons of God were not expunged during textual transmission. The canonical author commands the other gods, evil spiritual entities hostile to Israel, to bow before the incomparable YHWH.

Some scholars seek to argue that the "sons of God" and "host of heaven" in these passages refer only to astronomical bodies. This is not a coherent argument since elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the "host of heaven" refers to an assembly of spirit beings (תים 22.19-23) and the sons of God are called אלהים (Ps 82.1, 6). The designation "stars" is also used in Job 38.7 in parallel to אלהים (cf. Job 1–2). Other scholars, seeking to deny that Deuteronomy cast the other gods as being real entities, argue that this language refers merely to idols. While Deut 28.64 does equate the phrase with idols of wood and stone, the notion that the אלהים are only man-made objects cannot be sustained since the phrase is also linked with the spirit beings that are referred to as the heavenly host. Lastly, the notion that the gods are human judges of Israel, an interpretive option often used in Ps 82 with little success under scrutiny, is reduced to absurdity in these passages.

There are better solutions that help resolve any presumed tension in Deut 32.17. First, while the reality of other gods is assumed in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ps 82.1, 6; Exod 15.11; Ps 29.1), YHWH, the god of Israel, is cast as unique. He is, as Deut 10.17 asserts, the "God of gods." Second, for the ancient polytheist and the Israelite who lived in the context of polytheistic nations, what we see in Deuteronomy would not constitute a conundrum. While both the entity and the cult object are called a god, it cannot be presumed that ancient people considered a humanly fabricated statue or fetish object to be identical with the god in whose likeness it was fashioned. As one scholar of ancient cult objects notes:

When a non-physical being was manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance... in order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth... This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its "bodies," in all locations, all at one time.13

Michael Dick, another scholar who has devoted two decades of attention to the subject of idolatry in Israel and the ancient Near East, agrees. In his scholarly work on the subject, Dick cites a number of texts where the ancient idolater used deity language for the product of his hands, but also made an intellectual distinction between the statue and the deity it represented, or which was thought to take residence in the statue.14 In one telling citation, the destruction of the statue of Shamash of Sippar was not regarded as the death of Shamash. Indeed, Shamash could still be worshipped.

The OT parodies and denunciations of the gods and idolatry are to be viewed the same way. The ancient Israelite was not so naive as to think that Baal did not exist if his statue had not yet been made or if it was destroyed. If one returns to the verses discussed earlier that insist Israelites are worshipping "non-gods," those statements can quite coherently be meshed with Deuteronomic affirmations of the reality of other spiritual entities known as gods. In fact, these passages drive home the fact that idols made by human hands are not the gods. The foreign gods of the nations had their authority dispensed to them by YHWH. They weren't statues; they were more than statues. Idols were merely objects designed to focus...
attention and worship of the otherworldly deity the idolater sought to manipulate or appease. With this perspective, the biblical prohibition against making any likeness of YHWH becomes even more pronounced. YHWH could not be brought to earth, cajoled, and tamed.

With this distinction in mind—that by the use of the term “gods” the biblical writers may be referring to either actual spiritual entities that exist or the man-made objects that represent them—we can resolve the tensions that surface over Deut 32.17 and other passages in Deuteronomy that contain denial statements with respect to other gods. The biblical writer could rightly consider calling an object or appease. With this perspective, the biblical prohibition against making any likeness of YHWH becomes even more pronounced. YHWH could not be brought to earth, cajoled, and tamed.

A few more comments are in order with respect to those passages in Deuteronomy that presumably deny the existence of other gods, grouped here for convenience:

Deut 4.35  
“You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is the God (יהוה); besides him there is no other (לא).”

Deut 4.39  
“Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that YHWH, he is the God (יהוה) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (לא)…”

Deut 32.17  
“They sacrificed to demons (שמות) who were not God, to gods (אלהים) whom they have not known…”

Deut 32.21  
“They made me jealous with something that is not God (אין אל).”

Deut 32.39  
“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me (“א אשא והי”; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”

With respect to Deut 4.35, 39, יוהו is a verbless clause with the pronoun emphasizing the subject. Is this a denial of the existence of other gods? The key to reconciling this text with the passages in Deuteronomy that assume the reality of other gods is the word יוהו—the God par excellence, the God of all gods. When the text has Moses declaring, “YHWH, who is like you among the nations?” (Exod 15.11) did he really mean, “LORD, who is like you among the imaginary beings that really do not exist?” If the gods to whom YHWH is compared to by such language do not exist in the mind of the writer, where is the praise, and perhaps, even the honesty, in this statement? How does such language accomplish rhetorical persuasion if the audience does not believe that any other deities exist to whom YHWH may be compared?

But what about the second half of the statements of Deut 4.35, 39 (יהוה נאם)? Must the phrasing be construed as a denial of the existence of all other gods except YHWH? There are several difficulties with this understanding.

First, similar constructions are used in reference to Babylon and Moab in Isa 47.8, 10 and Nineveh in Zeph 2.15. In Isa 47.8, 10, Babylon says to herself, נאם אני ואין נאם (“I am, and there is none else beside me”). The claim is not that she is the only city in the world but that she has no rival. Nineveh makes the identical claim in Zeph 2.15 (אני ואין נאם). In these instances, these constructions cannot constitute the denial of the existence of other cities and nations. The point being made is very obviously incomparability.

Second, “gods” and other related forms (אלהים) need not mean “alone” in some exclusive sense. That is, a single person in a group could be highlighted or focused upon. 1 Kgs 18.1-6 is an example. The passage deals with the end of the three-year drought and famine during the career of Elijah. After meeting with Elijah, Obadiah calls Obadiah, the steward of his house, and together they set upon a course of action to find grass to save their remaining horses and mules. Verse 6a then reads: (Alternately, Deut 32.17 as, “Ahab went one way by himself [לבדו], and Obadiah went another way by himself [לבדו]). While it may be possible to suggest that Obadiah literally went through the land completely unaccompanied in his search, it is preposterous to say that the king of Israel went completely alone to look for grass, without bodyguards or servants. The point is that YHWH (and by extension אלהים) need not refer to complete isolation or solitary presence. Another example is Ps 51.6 (Eng., 51.4), which reads in part: “against you, you alone, I have sinned.”

God was not the only person against whom David had sinned. He had sinned against his wife and certainly Uriah. This is obviously heightened rhetoric designed to highlight the One who had been primarily offended. It was God against whom David’s offense was incomparable.15

Conclusion

This article has argued that the best translation of Deut 32.17 involves rendering ים as a singular (“God”). Doing so results in a reading where the passage assumes the reality of the other gods as demonic spiritual entities. This rendering and its result are internally consistent with other statements in Deuteronomy where YHWH disinherit the nations to the governance of lesser gods who are qualitatively and ontologically inferior to YHWH, who is unique. The lexical, syntactic, and contextual data support rendering Deut 32.17 as, “They sacrificed to demons, not God, gods they had never known…”

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

TRANSLATING (HO) CHRISTOS

The author is a former UBS translation consultant living in Aberdeen, Scotland.

After “Jesus,” “Christ” (in Greek christos) is the most common name in the New Testament. Yet translators are not often given all the help they need in dealing with it, even by UBS Handbooks. The main questions that may be involved in any occurrence of this term are:

15 Among several possible examples, two will suffice. In Eccl 7.29 Solomon states, “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (ESV). In Eccl 7.29 he only thought or conclusion Solomon ever drew in his life! In Jdg 7.5 we read (ESV), “So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘Everyone one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself [לבדו]. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.’” Are we to conclude that Gideon took all 300 men who passed this text and isolated them from each other? It is more coherent to say they were set aside as a group. The point would be that the group of 300 was set aside in comparison to the rest of the soldiers.