

Psalm 82: God of Justice



Psalm 82 (81) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

This psalm may be an Israelite adaptation of a pre-Israelite hymn.

God has taken his place in the council of the gods.
It is there God holds judgment.

Surrounded by lesser gods, the High God is holding court. Compare the following:

‘I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him’(1Kings 22:19).

The image is taken from life at court:

‘Saul was sitting at Gibeah, under the tamarisk tree on the height, with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing around him’(1Samuel 22:6).

‘I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him’(1Kings 22:19).

The psalmist identifies the Lord as the sovereign god summoning the lesser gods.

‘All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever’(Micah 4:5).

‘The Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods’(Psalm 95:3).

‘All gods bow down before him ... For you, Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods’(Psalm 97:7,9).

‘Lord, who is like you among the gods?’(Exodus 15:11).

At the time of the exile (6th century BC) contact with other peoples led to the first glimmers of monotheism.

‘The gods are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind’(Isaiah 41:29).

‘In Babylon you will see gods made of silver and gold and wood, which cause the heathen to fear. Beware of letting fear for these gods possess you, but say in your heart: It is you O Lord whom we must worship.’

(Letter of Jeremiah = Baruch 6)

In monotheistic Judaism 'gods' and 'sons of the gods' was interpreted as referring to angelic beings:

'O heavenly beings ['sons of the gods'],
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength'(Psalm 29:1).

'One day the heavenly beings ['sons of the gods']
came to present themselves before the Lord,
and Satan also came among them'(Job 1:6).

In the present psalm 'gods' was sometimes interpreted as referring to human administrators of justice acting with God-given authority.

Wisdom 6:1-8

‘Listen, O kings, and understand; learn, O judges of the ends of the earth. Give ear, you that rule over multitudes, and boast of many nations. For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High. He will search out your works and inquire into your plans. Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, God will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places.

Wisdom 6:1-8

For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy,
but the mighty will be mightily tested.

For the Lord of all will not stand in awe of anyone,
or show deference to greatness,

because he himself made both small and great,
and he takes thought for all alike.

But a strict inquiry is in store for the mighty.'

God has taken his place in the council of the gods.

It is there God holds judgment:

‘How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?’

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
defend the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the power of the wicked.’

‘Do justice for the orphan and the oppressed’(Psalm 10:18).

‘I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord.’

(Zephaniah 3:12)

The Torah insists on proper administration of justice:

‘You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour’(Leviticus 19:15).

‘I charged your judges at that time: ‘Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s’(Deuteronomy 1:16-17).

‘You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right’(Deuteronomy 16:19).

You gods know nothing.

You grope in the dark, while the world falls to pieces.

‘We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols’(1John 5:20-21).

‘All that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world’(1John 2:16).

the world falls to pieces.

There are cosmic repercussions of injustice.

I say: 'Although you are gods,
all of you children of the Most High;
nevertheless, you shall share the fate of humans,
and die like any prince.'

Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, "I say, you are gods"? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' – and the scripture cannot be annulled – can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said: I am God's Son'?(John 10:34-36)

The lesser gods might think that their immortal status as gods will save them, but they will die as mortal human beings die.

‘God said: You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die’(Genesis 3:3).

Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for you rule all the nations.