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Elohim



THE FIRST QUESTION in some of our catechisms is, "What is the chief end of man?" and the answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." But we will experience God in such fashion—we will glorify Him and enjoy Him—only in proportion as we know Him. The knowledge of God is more essential for the Christian, and indeed for all the world, than the knowledge of anything else—yes, of all things together. The prayer of the Lord Jesus for His disciples in John 17:3 was: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." And speaking of this, Christ, our Jehovah-Jesus, Paul sums up in Philippians 3:10 the great goal of his life: "I want to know Christ."

"I suppose if sin had not entered the world," says one writer, "the acquisition of the knowledge of God would have been the high occupation of man forever and ever." It is for a lack of knowledge of God that the prophet Hosea informs his people they are destroyed. And it is from the lack of knowledge of God that many

are without spiritual power or life. There is little real knowledge in these days of the one, true God.

There are many ways, of course, in which we may study God. The God who of old time spoke, "unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken to us in his Son," the epistle to the Hebrews tells us. And this Son, Jesus Christ, while on earth said in the great discourse and prayer with God: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word" (John 17:26).

True, it is in the face of Jesus Christ we best see the glory of God; yet while we are in the flesh we can only know in part at most. And it behooves us to know all we can learn of God. All the Scriptures are profitable to us for instruction and edification, but perhaps not very many people know much about the person of God as revealed in His names. Surely a study of these names should be a most profitable way of increasing that knowledge.

When Moses received a commission from God to go to His oppressed people in Egypt and deliver them from bondage, he said: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13).

Now the word *God* or even *Lord*, as we see it in our English Bibles, conveys little more to us than the designation of the Supreme Being and Sovereign of the universe. It tells little about His character and ways. Indeed we cannot say all that the myste-

rious word *God* means to us until we know more about Him. And we can know little of what the word *God* means until we go to the language from which the word *God* is translated, the language that is the first written record of the revelation of Himself, the language in which He spoke to Moses and the prophets.

Missionaries and translators have always had difficulty in finding a suitable word for the Hebrew word we translate God. Those who have attempted to translate this word into Chinese, for instance, have always been divided and still are as to which word is best. One of the greatest of these translations preferred a word that means "Lord of Heaven."

Now a name in the Old Testament was often an indication of a person's character or of some peculiar quality. But what one name could be adequate to God's greatness? After all, as one writer declares, a name imposes some limitation. It means that an object or person is this and not that, is here and not there. And if the Heaven of heavens cannot contain God, how can a name describe Him? What a request of Moses, then, that was—that the infinite God should reveal Himself to finite man by any one name! We can hardly understand or appreciate Moses himself unless we see him in his many-sided character of learned man and shepherd, leader and legislator, soldier and statesman, impulsive, yet meekest of men. We can know David, too, not only as shepherd, warrior, and king, but also as a prophet, a poet, and musician.

Even so, the Old Testament contains a number of names and compound names for God that reveal Him in some aspect of His

character and dealings with mankind. It is our purpose in this series of studies to examine these names and their meanings, their significance for ourselves as well as for those of old.

As one would expect, the opening statement of the Scriptures contains the name *God*. "In the beginning God"! The Hebrew word from which this word *God* is translated is Elohim. While not the most frequently occurring word for the Deity, it occurs 2,570 times. The one that occurs most frequently is the word translated Lord in the King James Version.

Elohim occurs in the first chapter of Genesis thirty-two times. After that, the name Jehovah appears as well as Elohim; and in many places a combination of the two—Jehovah-Elohim. As far back as the twelfth century, students noticed that these different names were used in the Bible, but thought little of it until about the eighteenth century when a French physician thought he discovered the reason for the use of different names of God. He said that the book of Genesis (especially) was based on two other documents, one written by a man who had apparently known God only as Elohim—this was called the Elohist document—and the other written by a man who had known God only by the name Jehovah—this was called the Jehovistic document.

Scholars pursued this theory until they thought there had originally been five or six documents, and even many fragments of documents all pieced and fitted together by a later editor, and then altered and added to by still later editors so that some of the stories we now read in Genesis and other books were made up of

parts of stories from various documents and fragments. Moses was denied authorship of most of the Pentateuch. The theory was carried to such lengths of absurdity that it was far more difficult to believe than the simple, plain declaration of the Bible itself that Moses wrote these things. And indeed who, of all people, could have been in a better position and better able to write them than he? One can only think of many of these scholars that much learning hath made them mad. The point is that they could see no other basis, no other significance for the use of different names for God in the Old Testament than a literary basis—a literary significance—as though there is no significance at all for the spiritual mind. There is a spiritual significance in the use of these different names. It is much more “rational” to believe that the great and infinite and eternal God has given us these different names to express different aspects of His being and the different relationships He sustains to His creatures.

The Meaning of the Word

In order to gain some idea of the meaning of this name of God, Elohim, we must examine its origin and note how, generally, it is used. There is some difference of opinion as to the root from which Elohim is derived. Some hold to the view that it is derived from the shorter word *El*, which means mighty, strong, prominent. This word *El* itself is translated “God” some 250 times and frequently in circumstances that especially indicate the great power of God. For instance, in Numbers 23:22 God is spoken of

as the El who brought Israel up out of Egypt—"he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn" [wild ox] (KJV). The Scriptures make very much of God's mighty arm in that great deliverance. So in the next verse follows: "it will now be said of Jacob and Israel, 'See what God [El] has done!'"

In Deuteronomy 10:17 (KJV) we read that "Jehovah your [Elohim] is God of gods, and Lord of lords, *the God* (or *El*) who is great, mighty, and dreadful." It is this word *El* that is used in that great name *Almighty God*, the name under which God made great and mighty promises to Abraham and to Jacob (Genesis 17:1; 35:11). It is also one of the names given to that promised Son and Messiah of Isaiah 9:6-7—God, the Mighty.

Thus, from this derivation, Elohim may be said to express the general idea of greatness and glory. In the name *Jehovah*, as we shall see more fully, are represented those high moral attributes of God that are displayed only to rational creatures. The name *Elohim*, however, contains the idea of creative and governing power, of omnipotence and sovereignty. This is clearly indicated by the fact that from Genesis 1:1 to 2:4 the word *Elohim* alone is used, and that thirty-five times. It is the Elohim who by His mighty power creates the vast universe; who says, and it is done; who brings into being what was not; by whose word the worlds were framed so that things that are seen were not made of the things that do appear (Hebrews 11:3). It is this Elohim with whose Greek equivalent Paul confronts the philosophers on Mars' Hill saying that He made the world (cosmos) and all things, and

by this very fact is constituted possessor and ruler of heaven and earth; whose presence cannot be confined by space; whose power doesn't need man's aid, for through His great will and power and agency, all things and nations have their very being.

It is most appropriate that by this name God should reveal Himself—bringing cosmos out of chaos, light out of darkness, habitation out of desolation, and life in His image.

There is another word from which some say Elohim is derived. It is *Alah*, which is said to mean to declare or to swear. Thus it is said to imply a covenant relationship. Before examining this derivation, however, it may be well to say that in either case, whether El or Alah, the idea of omnipotence in God is expressed. To make a covenant implies the power and right to do so, and it establishes the fact of “absolute authority in the Creator and Ruler of the universe.” So the Elohim is seen making a covenant with Abraham, and because there is none greater, He swears by Himself. “By myself I have sworn.” In Genesis 17 we see perhaps a combination of both of these derivations. In verse 1 we have: “I am God Almighty [El-Shaddai]; walk before me and be blameless”; in verse 7: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you,” that is, to be with them in covenant relationship.

It is the Elohim who says to Noah, “The end of all flesh is come before me.” But He cannot completely destroy the work of

His hands concerning which He has made a covenant and so He continues: "But will establish my covenant with you" (Genesis 6:18). "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth . . . never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life" (Genesis 9:16, 15).

The Elohim remembers Abraham when He destroys the cities of the plain and for His covenant's sake spares Lot. Joseph on his deathbed declares to his brethren: "I am about to die. But [Elohim] will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Genesis 50:24). He is the Elohim who keeps covenant and loving-kindness with His servants who walk before Him with all their heart (1 Kings 8:23).

With regard to Israel, over and over again it is written: "I will be your [Elohim] and you will be my people." The covenant element in this name is clearly seen because of God's covenant relationship to Israel, and this is especially brought out in such passages as Jeremiah 31:33 and 32:40, where the name *Elohim* is used in connection with that new covenant, an everlasting covenant that God will one day make with His people Israel when He will put His law and His fear within their hearts.

To Israel in distress comes the word: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your [Elohim]" (Isaiah 40:1). For the eternal God who covenants for and with them and us will keep His covenant.

The Plural Form

There is one other striking peculiarity in the name *Elohim*. It is in the plural. It has the usual Hebrew ending for all masculine nouns in the plural. A devout saint and Hebrew scholar of two centuries ago, Dr. Parkhurst,¹ defined the word *Elohim* as a name usually given in the Scriptures to the ever blessed Trinity by which they represent themselves as under the obligation of an oath to perform certain conditions. According to this definition the Elohim covenanted not only with the creation but, as the Godhead, within itself, concerning the creation. This is seen from Psalm 110:4, where David says concerning his Lord, the coming anointed One or Messiah: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'" This is, of course, as the book of Hebrews confirms, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the first and the last, the eternally begotten Son of God, the object of God's love before the foundation of the world (John 17:24); who shared God's glory before the world was (John 17:5). Colossians 1:16 tells us that by Him or in Him were all things created. But creation is the act of the Elohim. Therefore, Christ is in the Elohim or Godhead. Then even in Genesis 1:3 we read that the spirit of the Elohim moved or brooded over the face of the waters. The entire creation, animate and inanimate, was, then, not only the work of the Elohim, but the object of a covenant within the Elohim guaranteeing its redemption and perpetuation. It is quite clear that the Elohim is a plurality in unity.

So, Dr. Parkhurst continues: “Accordingly Jehovah is at the beginning of creation called Elohim, which implies that the divine persons had sworn when they created.”²

It is significant that although plural in form it is constantly accompanied by verbs and adjectives in the singular. In the very first verse of Genesis, the verb *create* is singular, and so all through the chapter and indeed through the Bible. In many places (as in Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 45:5, 22, etc.), we find singular pronouns. “I am [Elohim], and there is no [Elohim] other.” Other places in the Scriptures (2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalms 7:9; 57:2, etc.) use adjectives in the singular with Elohim. In contrast with this, when the word *elohim* is used of heathen gods, plural adjectives are used, as in 1 Samuel 4:8, etc. Then again this one Elohim speaks of Himself as *Us*, as in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image”; in Genesis 3:22, which speaks of man becoming “like one of us.” In 11:7 God says: “Let us go down and confuse their language.” In Genesis 35:7 Jacob builds an altar at Bethel, calling it El Beth-El, the God of the House of God because there the Elohim revealed themselves to him. To the sovereign Lord of the universe, the Jehovah of hosts, whom Isaiah saw exalted high upon a throne, is ascribed the threefold Holy, and that same One from the throne calls to the prophet, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” So instances could be multiplied.

There are some who object to the idea of the Trinity in the word *Elohim*, and it is only fair to say that some conservative scholars as well as liberal and critical would not agree with it,

among them John Calvin. They say that the plural is only a plural of majesty such as used by rulers and kings. But such use of the plural was not known then. We find no king of Israel speaking of himself as “we” and “us.” Besides, the singular pronoun is so often used with Elohim. To be consistent with that view, we should always find not “I am your Elohim,” as we do find, but “*We* are your Elohim.”³

Others call it the plural of intensity and argue that the Hebrews often expressed a word in the plural to give it a stronger meaning—so blood, water, life are expressed in the plural. But as one writer points out,⁴ these arguments only favor the idea of a Trinity in the Elohim. The use of the plural only implies (even in the plural of majesty) “that the word in the singular is not full enough to set forth all that is intended.” With Elohim the plural form teaches us that no finite word can adequately convey the idea of the infinite personality or the unity of persons in the Godhead.

Certainly the use of this word in the plural is wonderfully consistent with that great and precious doctrine of the Trinity, and its use as already shown in the Old Testament surely must confirm that view.

There is blessing and comfort in this great name of God signifying supreme power, sovereignty, and glory on the one hand, for “thine [Elohim] is the power and the kingdom and the glory”; and on the other hand signifying a covenant relationship that He is ever faithful to keep. Thus He says to us, “I will be to you a

God" (Elohim), and we may say, "My [Elohim], in whom I trust" (Psalm 91:2).

Notes

1. Parkhurst, *Hebrew Lexicon* (see Elohim).
2. Ibid.
3. Girdleston, *Old Testament Synonyms*, 39.
4. Ibid.