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

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MICHAEL S. HEISER

DOES DEUTERONOMY 32.17 ASSUME OR DENY THE REALITY OF OTHER GODS?

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Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, is well known among biblical scholars for its textual, linguistic, and translation difficulties.¹ Attention to Deut 32 has tended to focus on vv. 8-9, and 43 in light of fragments of those verses recovered at Qumran and their disagreement with the Masoretic Text (MT).² Though conceptually related to these verses and briefly discussed in commentaries, Deut 32.17 has received no concentrated attention in scholarly journals. Given the divergent ways the verse has been handled by Bible translators, Deut 32.17 deserves consideration.

Translation issues and options

Overview

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

יבחו לשדים לא אלהים לא ידעום חדשים מקרב באו לא שערום אבותים:

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

ESV	"They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known . . ."
RSV	"They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known . . ."
NJPS	"They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, Gods they had never known . . ." ³
KJV	"They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not . . ."
NIV	"They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known . . ."
NASB	"They sacrificed to demons who were not God, To gods whom they have not known . . ."
NRSV	"They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known . . ."

The first three translations render אֱלֹהִים 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).

² See for example, P. W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954): 12-15; idem, "Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text," *JBL* 78 (1959): 21; Julie Duncan, "A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave 1V. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^d, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^f, 4QDt^g, 4QDt^h," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.LX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 75-79; and Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-8.

³ NJPS has "Gods" capitalized because it is the first word of the new line according to the poetic arrangement used.

אלה as a plural (ESV, RSV, NJPS) produced a translation that denies the deity status of the שדים (“demons”). Such translations, however, are forced to juxtapose this denial with the next clause, לא ידעום אלהים (“gods which they did not know”), which appears to contradict this denial. How can the demons be gods and not gods in the same verse? The other translations, which take אלה 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 (שדים) 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 אלהן (“gods”).

Lexical-Semantic considerations

The first issue that needs to be addressed is whether אלה is more accurately translated as a singular or plural. The word אלה is a defective spelling of the lemma אלוה. A computer search of the Hebrew Bible (BHS) reveals that the lemma אלוה occurs fifty-eight times. Two of those occurrences are in Deuteronomy and both are in Deut 32. Aside from Deut 32.17, אלוה is the spelling found in Deut 32.15, where we read that Jeshurun (Israel) “forsook אלוה 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 32.15 is likely Deut 31.16, 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 (עשה) him” hearkens back to Deut 32.6, where there is verb lemma agreement.

There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where אלוה 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 Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (אלהי ספרַיִם).” The pointing here suggests that the lemma is not אלוה but rather אלהים in a misspelled or archaic plural construct form. That the Qere reading for this form is אלה argues forcefully that the lemma is not אלוה but rather אלהים.⁴ 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 אלה 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 אלה. 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 לא אלה in Deut 32.17.

Syntactical considerations

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

Andersen and Forbes chose to characterize לא אלה in Deut 32.17 as a phrase of “inverted modification” in their syntactical database of the Hebrew Bible.⁵ 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 הם קנאוני בלא-אל בעסוני בהבליהם

The words בלא-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 אלה 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 (בניך עזבוני וישבעו) (בלא אלהים) 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 (ויהיה כהן ללא אלהים) 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 (כי לא אלהים הגה) . . .”

⁴ The apparatus of the BHS notes the following: mlt Mss אלהים ut Q אלהי, K אלה (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: SESB Version. [electronic ed.; Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2003, c1969/77]).

⁵ Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, *The Hebrew Bible: Andersen-Forbes Phrase Marker Analysis* (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2005).

Jer 2.11 “Has any nation changed its gods though they are not gods (והמה לא אלהים) . . .”

Jer 16.20 “Can a man make for himself gods? They *are not gods* (המה (ולא אלהים)!”

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

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, “The Egyptians are human, and not God (ולא-אל) . . .” Ezekiel 28.2, 9 are identical in the statement, “And you are a man, not a god (ולא-אל) . . .”

These syntactically analogous examples are interesting, but not compelling with respect to adopting a plural translation for אלה since the lemma in those analogous cases that is translated as a plural is אלהים, not אלה. The lemma 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 אלה, where there is no plural precedent elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The argument from analogy depends on starting with instances where אלהים is plural and then using that phenomenon to comment on אלה in Deut 32.17, rather than taking אלה 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 אלה.

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.⁶

Scholars have noted for some time that Deuteronomy contains several passages that not only assume the existence of other gods, but also have those 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 [בני האלהים].⁷ But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

⁶ Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *BBR* 18.1 (2008): 1-30.

⁷ Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the MT in Deut 32.8, which reads בני ישראל (“sons of Israel”). See, for example, Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut 32) from Qumran,” 12-15; idem, “Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text,” 21; Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV”; Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 269; Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.LX, 75-79*; Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 514-8.

Deut 4.19 Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.²⁰ But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

In Deut 17.3 the host of heaven are referred to as “other gods” (אלהים אחרים), a phrase used frequently in Deuteronomy, and are worshipped by Israelites in defiance of Deut 4.19-20. If one traces אלהים אחרים through Deuteronomy, one discovers Deut 29.23-25 (Eng., 29.24-26), which contains phrases found in both Deut 32.17, the passage under consideration, and Deut 32.8-9, where the nations were allotted by YHWH to the sons of God:

24 . . . all the nations will say, “Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?”²⁵ Then people will say, “It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt,²⁶ and went and served other gods (אלהים אחרים) and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.”

In addition to vv. 8-9, another verse of Deut 32 assumes the reality of other gods. Deuteronomy 32.43 is well known to textual critics, since the text-critical data make it abundantly clear that this verse was altered from its original form for theological reasons.⁸ A comparison of MT with 4QDeut⁴ demonstrates this:

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 exclusivistic 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 postulate 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 “intrinsic 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], 6:407). The social and religious pressures that led to textual standardization in the first century C.E. are a much better milieu for these textual changes, and so the theological motivation behind them does not undermine the thesis of this article; it strengthens it.

MT	4QDeut ⁹
הַרְגִינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ O nations, acclaim His people!	הַרְגִינוּ שָׁמַיִם עִמּוֹ Rejoice, O heavenly ones, with Him!
	וְהִשְׁתַּחוּ לוֹ כָּל אֱלֹהִים Bow down, all you gods, before Him!
כִּי דַם-עַבְדָּיו יִקּוּם For he will avenge the blood of his servants;	כִּי דַם בְּנָיו יִקּוּם For he will avenge the blood of his sons;
וְנָקַם יֵשֵׁב לְצַרּוֹ He will exact vengeance on his adversaries,	וְנָקַם יֵשֵׁב לְצַרּוֹ He will exact vengeance on his adversaries.
	וְלִמְשָׁנָאֵי יִשְׁלַם He will repay those who hate him,
וְכִפֵּר אֲדָמְתוֹ עִמּוֹ And make atonement for his land (and) his people.	וְיִכְפֵּר אֲדָמְתוֹ עִמּוֹ And make atonement for his people's land.

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 שממים to גוים. This alteration seems odd, but the motive becomes clear if שממים is understood not as “heavens” but as “heavenly beings,” a meaning found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ Many scholars would assert that this original pairing was deliberately altered by the Masoretes to avoid the reference to other gods.¹¹ This supposition does not explain why other references to plural gods and the heavenly sons of God were not expunged during textual transmission.¹² 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 (1 Kgs 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 בני 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 אחרים are only man-made objects cannot be sustained since the phrase

9 For the published text of 4QDeut⁹, see Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut 32) from Qumran,” 12-15; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4: LX, 137-42*, plate XXXI. LXX agrees with 4QDeut⁹, but adds yet another bicolon to the first as a secondary, explanatory gloss that softens the divine vocabulary by inserting angels into the parallelism (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 516-7).

10 The parallelism in both Job 15.15 and Jer 14.22 supports this translation. See also Alexander Rofé, “The End of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:43),” in *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation* (ed. Alexander Rofé; N.Y.: Continuum / T&T Clark, 2002), 50.

11 Arie van der Kooij, “The Ending of the Song of Moses: On the Pre-Masoretic Version of Deut 32:43,” in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honor of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed. F. Garcia Martinez, A. Hilhorst, J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, A. S. van der Woude; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 93. See also the comments of Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 516.

12 Evaluating the coherence of any hypothesis as to why such textual changes were made is beyond the scope of this article. This issue is briefly addressed by this author in Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism.” A more lengthy discussion can be found in Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature,” 1-33.

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 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

13 Gay Robins, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Neal H. Walls; ASOR Book Series 10; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1-2.

14 Michael P. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 33-34.

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 made by human hands a god to be absurd while understanding that there were rival spiritual entities in control of, and worshipped by, the nations outside Israel.

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 (האלהים); besides him there is no other (אין עוד מלבדו).”
- Deut 4.39 “Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that YHWH, he is *the* God (האלהים) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (אין עוד).”
- Deut 32.17 “They sacrificed to demons (שדים) 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 (בלא־אל) . . .”
- Deut 32.39 “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me (ואין אלהים עמדי); 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, יהוה הוא האלהים 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 האלהים. While there are other אלהים, YHWH is האלהים—the God par excellence, the God of all gods. When the text has Moses declaring, “YHWH, who is like you among the אלים?” (Exod 15.11) did he really mean, “LORD, who is like you among the imaginary beings that really do not exist”? If the other 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 (אין עוד מלבדו)? 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, אני ואפסי עוד (“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 ואפסי עוד). 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, מלבדו and other related forms (לבדו, לבד) 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, Ahab 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: אחאב הלך בדרך אחד לבדו ועבדיהו הלך בדרך אחד לבדו (“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 לבדו (and by extension מלבדו) need not refer to complete isolation or solitary presence. Another example is Ps 51.6 [Eng., 51.4], which reads in part: לך לבדך חטאתי (“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 אלה 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 disinherits 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

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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 [לבד] I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (ESV). Is Eccl 7.29 the only thought or conclusion Solomon ever drew in his life? In Judg 7.5 we read (ESV), “So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself [לבד]. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.’” Are we to conclude that Gideon took all 300 men who passed this test 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.