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Polyphonic Psalm 82: Finding Bakhtin in a Finalized Theodicy

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Imaginative readings of Psalm 82 that employ various contemporary interpretive viewpoints highlight the psalm's polyphony while resisting discovery of an easy theodicy. This essay puts into conversation Bakhtinian, feminist, and post-Shoah interpretations of the psalm, demonstrating that a polyphonic reading of Psalm 82 complicates any simplistic theodicy.

Keywords: polyphony, Bakhtin, theodicy, Psalms, feminist criticism, Holocaust

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Introduction

While many psalms contain an unresolved polyphony, some commentators interpret Psalm 82 as preferring a singular viewpoint on theodicy.[1] However, imaginative readings using contemporary interpretive methods disallow such an interpretation. Thus, the goal of this essay is to bring contemporary interpretive lenses—Bakhtinian, feminist, and post-Shoah—to this psalm. In doing so, it will show that a polyphonic reading of Psalm 82 complicates any simplistic theodicy.

1. For polyphony in the psalms, see: the chapter "An Audience with the King: The Perspective of Dialogue" in Herbert J. Levine, *Sing unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 79-129; Carleen Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 357 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Patricia K. Tull, "Bakhtin's Confessional Self-Accounting and Psalms of Lament," *Biblical Interpretation* 13, no. 1 (2005): 41-55. For seeing Psalm 82 as primarily monologic, see Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 354-359; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2 and Lamentations*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, ed. Rolf P. Knierim, Gene M. Tucker, and Marvin A. Sweeney, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 113-117; James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 278-281; James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 270-271; Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 20 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 328-342; Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 586-591; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 556-561.

Definitions and Method

Justice

Considering Psalm 82's focus on theodicy, justice is an important term for discussing this psalm. Of the two Hebrew words referring to the act of judging, Psalm 82 uses the root *šāfaṭ*. While biblical authors use the verb across a range of meanings, across the verb's uses the authors consistently draw upon an underlying concept of the preservation of social order such that justice (social, distributive, retributive, etc.) persists and leads to peace for all members of the community.[2] Three uses of the verb are pertinent for Psalm 82. The first involves divine judgment in a forensic sense, with God or a god sifting through the details of a case in order to reach a verdict.[3] The second usage describes a judge making a discrete ruling in favor of one party leading towards that party's vindication, oftentimes against another party; the second usage regularly appears promoting the justice of the needy.[4] The third pertinent usage involves God ruling over the world as the source of justice, oftentimes appearing alongside concepts of equity, uprightness, and righteousness.[5]

The Polyphonic Work

To achieve a polyphonic reading of Psalm 82, this essay draws upon the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin observes that most European novels extant at his time are monologic: they primarily promote the author's viewpoint by building up characters who agree with the author and undermining characters who conflict with the author.[6] Note that a monologic novel still contains a dialogue of competing ideas, but the author intends the readers to arrive at a singular idea over against the others.[7] On the other hand, Bakhtin identifies a polyphonic text as one

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2. Temba L. J. Mafico, "Just, Justice," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:1127; Richard Schultz, "9149 שׁפט," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:214.

3. Schultz, 216. Schultz even cites Ps. 82:1 as an example of forensic judgment, citing Tate as further evidence. For further examples of this usage in the Psalms, see Ps. 37:33; 58:1; 109:7.

4. Ibid., 214. For examples of ruling in favor of or against a given party in the Psalms, see Ps. 7:8; 10:18; 26:1; 43:1; 72:4; 75:7; 109:31; 141:6.

5. Ibid., 216. For examples of God ruling over the world in the Psalms, see Ps. 9:19; 58:11; 67:4; 94:2; 96:13; 98:9.

6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5-8.

7. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 51.

that contains unfinalized dialogue that de-centers the position of the author and that equally distinguishes the position of every character.[8]

Polyphonic works have a dialogic approach to truth, which has four primary characteristics. First, dialogic truth can only appear in the context of a "plurality of consciousnesses."[9] The plurality occurs when a dialogue happens between characters who exist as entities unsubordinated to the same overarching ideological principle.[10] Second, the consciousnesses creating dialogue must be "embodied."[11] That is, the consciousnesses must derive from characters with full contexts to represent their viewpoint, not being simply abstract ideas spoken by the characters as mere placeholders for their speech.[12] Third, dialogic truth "resists systematization."[13] The moment of dialogue does not apply to all other moments, but instead exists as a singular event and its context.[14] Fourth, the dialogue is "unfinalizable."[15] The dialogue cannot merge into a singular conclusion, but must stay open ended by allowing for the possibility of further voices to provide additional perspectives in the dialogue.

A polyphonic work's decentering of the author and elevating of other characters occur together. While in a monologic work the author's opinion has the final word, when the author's opinion appears in a polyphonic work, it must have equal weight as any other consciousness.[16] With the author's opinion equalized, other consciousnesses are able to speak for themselves, rather than having the author subsume them.[17] The equalization of viewpoints allows readers to more fully grasp the consciousnesses' reasonings on their own terms rather than through the author's terms, requiring the author to relinquish control of others' thoughts.[18]

Though Psalm 82 depicts the encounter of various consciousnesses, it does not display the four characteristics of a polyphonic work. For example, by the final verse the author subsumes vs. 1-7 under one monologic notion—God brings about justice.[19] Thus, to achieve polyphony in the psalm, this essay will turn to contemporary interpretive lenses, specifically feminist criticism and post-Shoah (post-Holocaust) criticism to give all consciousnesses present in the text a voice and context, to allow those consciousnesses

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8. Miriam J. Bier, *'Perhaps There Is Hope': Reading Lamentations as a Polyphony of Pain, Penitence, and Protest* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 33-35.

9. Bier, 33.

10. Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 3 (2002): 91.

11. Bier, 33.

12. Bakhtin, 47-48.

13. Bier, 34.

14. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 61-64.

15. Bier, 34.

16. Ibid.

17. Bakhtin, 49-50; Bier, 34-35.

18. Bakhtin, 78; Jacobs, 62.

19. In many of the consulted commentaries, the material on v. 8 talks about the alignment of the speaker's view and people's view with God's view, indicating the merging of voices. See Gerstenberger, 114; Mays, 271; Tate, 339-340; Terrien, 591; Weiser 560-561.

to remain unmerged, and to keep the dialogue open surrounding the psalm's treatment of theodicy.

The Consciousnesses of Psalm 82

Applying the contemporary interpretive lenses requires a preliminary discussion of the consciousnesses present in Psalm 82 because they provide the reasoning behind the choice of contemporary lenses in this essay. The first consciousness that appears in the text is God, the God of Israel, the first word in the body of the psalm.[20] God's context in the psalm is that of creator and sustainer, the one who judges the earth.[21] In the text, God personifies the ideas of righteousness, justice, uprightness, and equity in keeping with this essay's third definition of *šāfaṭ* that connects God to righteous governance of the earth.

The next consciousness present in the psalm is the "divine council" (Heb. עֲדַת־אֵל "council of El").[22] The nature of this consciousness is ambiguous. Some scholars see this phrase as a reference to human kings or judges, while others regard this phrase as a reference to other deities different from God.[23] While the choice concerning the meaning of the "divine council" creates different contexts for the second consciousness, it does not change the idea that the council embodies. The council comprises those who hold power to govern throughout the earth. For the sake of this essay, I will consider the "divine council" as referring to other deities different from God. As such, their context is that of the heavens where they govern their respective domains, whether a nation or part of nature. Lacking further context from the psalm, it is difficult to say more about these individuals. Instead, this essay will rely upon the contemporary literary lenses to create a more concrete characterization of these consciousnesses.

Another consciousness mentioned in the psalm is that of the wicked.[24] While Psalm 82 mentions them as distinct from the divine council, the two are closely related. Given that the gods judge in favor of the wicked, and God condemns the gods for their judgment, the text implies that the gods are wicked themselves. Additionally, in the text the gods unilaterally promote the ideas embodied by the consciousness of the wicked, thus merging the two consciousnesses, effectively creating a single consciousness present in a variety of contexts.[25] Thus, when the text describes how the downtrodden suffer at the

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20. Ps. 82:1.

21. Brueggemann, 355; Mays, 269-270; Tate, 339; Terrien, 590-591; Weiser, 560-561.

22. Ps. 82:1.

23. All the commentaries I consulted see the "council of El" as referring to deities; Brueggemann, 354; Gerstenberger, 114; Limburg, 279; Mays, 269; Tate, 329, 335; Terrien, 588-589; Weiser, 556-557. For a more thorough treatment of this discussion, see the literature review in Willem S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" *Biblica* 76, no. 2 (1995): 219-221.

24. Ps. 82:2.

25. Tate, 341; Weiser, 559-560.

hand of the wicked, the gods share in their oppression by way of the gods' approval of the wicked.[26]

The next consciousness mentioned in the psalm is that of the weak, the orphan, the lowly, the destitute, and the needy, all in parallel with each other as those who suffer.[27] The context of this consciousness is that of marginalization and adversity. They lack power to undo their hardship, especially in the context of unjust rulings from those with power over the marginal. They embody the idea of yearning for justice and comfort out of a place of suffering.[28]

The final consciousness in the psalm arises from certain interpretations of the psalm. This consciousness could exist in the "I" of v. 6, or in the speaker of the cry for God to judge the earth in v. 8. Even if a given interpretation does not locate a distinct consciousness in either of these two places, there is the consciousness of the Psalmist who may or may not make themself known in the psalm. The Psalmist has two non-exclusive possibilities for location and ideology. The first is that of a God-fearing person who wishes to act righteously towards God.[29] Such an ideology locates the Psalmist likely within Israel, possibly within some sort of position of influence given the Psalmist's ability to write. In such a case, the Psalmist embodies the idea of obedience towards God as the righteous creator and judge of the world.

The Psalmist could additionally be among the sufferers mentioned in vs. 3-4.[30] If so, the Psalmist still represents the idea of obedience towards God, but now their context includes that of wicked people inflicting injustice upon them. If they are in a position of influence as the previous paragraph conjectures, then their position is more likely to be that of priest or prophet who maintains their obedience to God despite the corruption around them.

Given the various consciousnesses present in Psalm 82, this essay now turns to outlining the methods for feminist and post-Shoah criticism. In so doing, the contemporary lenses will provide more concrete contexts and voices for consciousnesses the psalm does not adequately represent.

Feminist Criticism

The important aspect of feminist criticism pertinent to Psalm 82 is how it directs readers to pay attention to who possesses and uses power.[31] Power does not just refer to authority, which is the right to wield power. It also refers to the ability to influence others

26. Ps. 82:4; Terrien, 589.
27. Ps. 82:3-4; Brueggemann, 355; Limburg, 280; Tate, 336; Terrien, 589; Weiser, 559.
28. Limburg, 280-281; Mays, 271.
29. Brueggemann, 355.
30. Terrien, 589.
31. Esther Fuchs, "Biblical Feminisms: Knowledge, Theory and Politics in the Study of Women in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 16, no. 3 (2008): 217.

or affect change, regardless of whether someone has the authority to do so. In this way, power is "a relational term" that can be used both positively and negatively.[32]

As a corollary to feminist criticism's focus on power and authority, feminist criticism also allows readers to locate responsibility for outcomes. While my source for feminist criticism's focus on power does not mention responsibility among its definitions and methods, the first application of its methods attends to the power involved with shifting responsibility for humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.[33] Such a comparison between the Genesis text and Psalm 82 is possible because both Psalm 82 and Gen. 3:9-19 depict God holding court to determine subsequent action upon the occurrence of misconduct, resulting in God's verdict. In each setting, questions linger concerning how complicit God is regarding the misconduct of those underneath God, especially considering the idea that God is the ultimate judge governing the world.[34]

Thus, this reading will use feminist criticism's focus on power to look at the power, authority, and responsibility surrounding God in Psalm 82. As such, bringing together feminist criticism with Bakhtin creates an opportunity to find a wholly different way of identifying the speakers to creatively discover alternative voices speaking in an otherwise monologic psalm. In the courtroom context of Psalm 82, the gods are the only others present to dialogue with God. Thus, this reading will find the voice of the gods responding back to God whenever possible while also attempting to provide the gods with a historical context from which they might speak.[35]

Post-Shoah Criticism

While the feminist reading finds the collective voice of the gods as an alternative speaker, the post-Shoah reading will find speech and provide contexts for the weak, the orphan, the lowly, and the needy. These sufferers represent another party for whom Psalm 82 has an impact, despite not adequately receiving a voice. Since the premise of post-Shoah readings is reading for the benefit of those who suffer, it is well equipped for hearing the voice of Psalm 82's downtrodden.[36]

As part of siding with the victim, Dror Schwartz's discussion of *Kiddush ha-Hayyim*, the "sanctification of life," is helpful. *Kiddush ha-Hayyim* is a phrase that some Jews used in concentration camps as a word play on the tradition of *Kiddush Hashem*. *Kiddush Hashem* is the practice of self-sacrifice to honor, or to not dishonor, the name of

32. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

33. Fewell, 22-38.

34. Ibid., 33-34.

35. There is a precedent for finding the voice of the gods in the divine council. Tate finds a scholar who sees a quotation from the gods in Isa. 40:1-8. Tate, 333.

36. Charles M. Rix, "Trauma and Narrative Wreckage in the Biblical Story of Hagar," *Cultural and Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (May-Jun. 2015): 167-176.

God.[37] During the Shoah, the Nazis wanted to destroy the Jews and everything they stood for, including their worship of God. Therefore, Rabbi Nissenbaum directed the Jews to practice *Kiddush ha-Hayyim*—living despite great suffering—so that the Nazis would not be successful in wiping out the honor of God with the death of the Jews.[38] This essay will keep in mind the directive of *Kiddush ha-Hayyim* as the people speak out against their suffering to inform its understanding of their cries.

While the historical-critical reading of the text already sees the text in favor of the weak, the orphan, the lowly, the destitute, and the needy, it never gives them a voice, except in the possibility present in some interpretations of Psalm 82 that see the Psalmist as part of the sufferers. Thus, post-Shoah criticism interacts with Bakhtin in Psalm 82 by providing the sufferers a concrete voice and context in a text that otherwise lets them speak minimally at best.

Application of Method

Psalm 82
[1]A Psalm of Asaph
God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgement:
[2]"How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
[3]Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
[4]Rescue the weak and the needy;
Deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
[5]They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
They walk around in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
[6]I say, "You are gods,
Children of the Most High, all of you;
[7]Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
And fall like any prince."
[8]"Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
For all the nations belong to you.

Historical Critical

The psalm begins in v. 1 with a narratorial introduction that establishes the setting. The courtroom setting suggests that the utterances made here will be serious and to the

37. See "Dror Schwartz: The Holocaust and Sanctification of Life," in *Holocaust Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 2002), 86-87.
38. Ibid., 87.

point; they will search for the truth of matters and propose subsequent action.[39] Though the text does not name the speaker in v. 2, the preceding verse implies that this is God's speech against the gods. Verses 2-4 make explicit the importance of just ruling, especially for those lacking the power to create justice for themselves. The speech reveals God's desire for justice, so much so that justice appears as a prerequisite for divinity.[40]

Interpreters differ on their opinion of the speaker in v. 5. Some see this verse as being the voice of God. These interpreters take this verse alongside vs. 2-4 and vs. 6-7 to be God's judgment (vs. 2-4), verdict (v. 5), and sentence (vs. 6-7) against the gods.[41] As such, God not only desires justice but will also act to make justice occur. In this case, God strips the gods of their divinity, condemning them to die like mortals.

Alternatively, some interpreters see v. 5 as the voice of the Psalmist responding to the actions in the heavenly court.[42] If that is the case, then the Psalmist is crying out to God, providing evidence against the gods for the trial. The Psalmist's utterance simultaneously reveals the Psalmist's context—a place of instability due to injustice—and the Psalmist's desire for someone to stabilize the earth with equity and harmony.[43] This leads to vs. 6-7 where again God condemns the gods for their crimes.[44]

Though v. 8 again lacks notation of an explicit speaker, God as the subject of the imperative alongside the earthly direction of the request indicates that the Psalmist speaks these lines. With the dethroning of the world's previous stewards, the speaker urges God to take their place as ruler since God already owns the earth.[45] The Psalmist's wish shows that ultimately the Psalmist has faith that God can create justice on earth, just as God does in the divine court.

On its own, the historical-critical reading of the psalm is monologic. God speaks to the gods who do not have a voice, and God performs actions on them without notification of the gods' response. It also forms a straightforward theodicy: injustice exists in the world not because of God, but because of lesser divine beings.[46] The other voice in the psalm, that of the Psalmist, may speak another idea into the proceedings at v. 5—that of human suffering—but in v. 8 the Psalmist's voice ultimately agrees with the original voice of God.[47] The Psalmist says, "Yes God, you have taken away the unjust ones. Now bring justice (as is your nature) to the world."

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39. For a discussion of prophetic judgments in the psalm, see Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, ed. Joachim Begrich, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 279-280.

40. Brueggemann, 355; Tate, 336; Terrien, 590.

41. Brueggemann, 355; Gerstenberger, 113-114; Mays, 268; Weiser, 559-560.

42. See Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968), 268; Limburg, 280; Tate, 337-338; Terrien, 589.

43. Limburg, 280.

44. Tate, 337-338. Terrien sees vs. 6-7 as the voice of the Psalmist foreseeing God executing the gods (Terrien, 590).

45. Brueggemann, 355; Dahood, 271; Mays, 271; Tate, 339; Terrien, 590-591; Weiser, 560-561.

46. Tate, 339-340; Mays, 271; Weiser 560-561.

47. Gerstenberger, 114.

Feminist

By so imagining God's relationship to injustice, the historical-critical reading distances God from the source of injustice. As Weiser says, "Injustice could persist on earth only because God in his superhuman patience has not already intervened sooner."[48] Yet a question remains: Why is God patient despite the suffering of innocent people? This implicit question echoes in the Psalmist's final exhortation to God, though the consulted commentaries do not mention it.[49] On the other hand, feminist criticism is interested in questions such as these.

Psalm 82

[1]A Psalm of Asaph
God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgement:
Gods: [2]"How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
[3]Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
[4]Rescue the weak and the needy;
Deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
People: [5]They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
They walk around in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
God: [6]I say, "You are gods,
Children of the Most High, all of you;
[7]Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
And fall like any prince."
Gods: [8]"Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
For all the nations belong to you.

Psalm 82's opening verse still gives a narratorial remark on the setting of the psalm, but to find the voice of the gods, this reading asks readers to imagine v. 1 as describing God finished with the judgments, already having spoken the words of vs. 2-4.[50] After God levies the charges of injustice against the gods, vs. 2-4 could well be the gods' response back to God. Responding with God's same second-person plural verbs,

48. Weiser, 559.

49. Brueggemann, 355; Dahood, 271; Gerstenberger, 114-115; Limburg, 280-281; Mays, 270-271; Tate, 341; Terrien, 3890-391; Weiser, 560-561.

50. ישפט as an imperfect does not allow for reading in this manner. Yet it is common enough in Hebrew poetry to see the preterite form *yaqtul* without a waw-consecutive. This reading requires this form, rendering the second half of verse 1, "In the midst of the gods, God has judged." See Yigal Bloch, "The Prefixed Perfective and the Dating of Early Hebrew Poetry—A Re-evaluation," *Vetus Testamentum* 59, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 34-36.

their speech would have a mocking tone that implies to God, "You charge us with injustice and not delivering the needy, yet ultimately you own the world instead of us. Institute justice yourself!" Such speech assumes God's power and envisions God above the gods. Indeed, if God owns the world, then the only way the gods cold have authority over the nations is if God gives it to them. Though the historical-critical reading distances God from injustice, the gods' observation sees God and injustice closer together than God likely prefers.

The gods' mocking speech also demonstrates that the gods are aware of their own unjust actions. Yet their critique questions how different God is from the rest of the gods. Both parties have authority over the world. Both parties are divine. Both parties live in heaven while the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. In this way, the speech is the gods' defense for themselves: they hope that whatever happens to them, God must join their punishment since God is culpable for their injustice.

Then the Psalmist breaks through in v. 5, describing the state of both the divine council and the human world as God and the gods bicker in the heavens. As the council deliberates, the problem of injustice continues, reaching to the very foundations of the earth. The "they" of v. 5 can have multiple, non-exclusive referents. Firstly, "they" can refer to the divine council and possibly even to God. As such, the Psalmist laments at the inefficiency of the council, who spend more time arguing among themselves than fixing the problems they cause in the world. Secondly, "they" can refer to the people of the world. Due to the injustice to which the gods subject the world, the people have lost knowledge and understanding so that all they can do is wander in darkness. For both referents of "they," v. 5 reveals that the Psalmist is not just God's prophet to the people, but also the people's prophet to God, calling all who listen, human and divine alike, to uphold justice.

In response to the utterances the gods and the Psalmist direct toward God, God responds in vs. 6-7 by casting down the gods for their wickedness. Faced with critiques from all sides, God likely speaks these verses with anger: anger at the gods' inability, anger at the people's suffering, and anger at the fact of being challenged. Yet God's anger may be the outward expression of deeper emotions. The gods' inadequacy may reflect God's frustration concerning ruling in a manner that is sufficient to bring justice to all of God's varied creation. The people's suffering may cause God great sorrow that God cannot completely take away the people's pain without altering the people's very personhood. The challenges may reveal God's fear that the people's issues with God will make them not want to be in relationship with God.

This polyvalence shows that God cares about justice and wants to do right for the people, but that God sees how complicated accomplishing this task will be. Casting down the gods helps stop further injustice, but it does not solve the problems that still exist in the world. The copious residual injustice strains the relationship between God and people. Consequently, healing the wounds injustice inflicts is hard if those wounds make the people doubt God, as in v. 5.

Whatever the underlying emotions in God's utterance, the gods only hear God's anger and respond to it in v. 8. Using a tone dripping with irony, they ask for God to judge the world now that God has displaced them. This utterance is ironic because normally the people are the ones asking for God to judge the world due to injustice.[51] Instead, the gods, the normal objects of judgment (which results poorly for them), ask for God to judge. Their final utterance makes explicit what vs. 2-4 imply. If God, who in the background of the psalm established the gods, is to condemn the gods, God must also take responsibility for their injustice. The gods call upon God to take responsibility for God's use of power in appointing them by bringing justice to the world.

The dialogue between God and the gods embodies the challenge to those who have power to be self-critical in all their dealings. In this reading, God considers Godself to be the primary agent of justice, yet actions on God's part (the appointment of the gods) bring about injustice, complicating the historical-critical reading's theodicy. Indeed, God's lack of self-reflection allows for the critique to come from the very source of the psalm's injustice, the gods. The possible underlying sorrow in vs. 6-7 show that God has good intentions, but the gods' final challenge in v. 8 demonstrates that intentions are not enough. Action should follow self-critical analysis.

Post-Shoah

Now this essay turns to the final contemporary lens. While God and the gods received ample attention in the previous interpretations, the sufferers were only able to speak once or twice despite the importance God's trial has for their future. Thus, the post-Shoah reading will provide them a stronger voice and fuller context.

Psalm 82
A Psalm of Asaph
[1]God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgement:
People: [2]"How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
[3]Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
[4]Rescue the weak and the needy;
Deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
God: [5]They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
They walk around in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
People: [6]I say, "You are gods,
Children of the Most High, all of you;
[7]Nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,

51. See Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 123.

And fall like any prince."
[8]"Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
For all the nations belong to you.

Once again, v. 1 is a narratorial introduction. Yet instead of establishing the immediate setting for the words of vs. 2-4, it provides background information. Verse 1 depicts God and the gods deliberating in the heavens while the people wait below for their deliverance. Yet as the people wait, they experience the worst the world has to offer: the humiliation and separation of the ghettos, the cruelty and death of the concentration camps.

Waiting for God's court to adjourn, they raise their voices to the divine council in vs. 2-4, "How long will you judge unjustly . . . Give justice to the weak and the orphan . . . Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." These words from the people go to the council in different volumes and inflections: a whisper, a sob, a shout, a rage. Yet in all of them exists desperation.[52] They accuse the entire council of injustice: doing nothing while people suffer. Whatever happens with the gods, the people care more about their own deliverance from oppression than the punishment of divine abstracts.

Hearing the people's cries, God in v. 5 turns from judging and defends God's tardiness. With this verse, God effectively says to the people, "Because the gods' ignorance shakes the foundations of the earth, I must stop them before they create more injustice." For God, this is the necessary action since, as the gods' head, God must deal with them. Indeed, the "god" of the Nazis likely sits among the gods of the nations. God, having left the Nazi "god" to its own devices, must deal with the beliefs and attitudes that Nazi thought perpetuates. This utterance shows that God is not happy about the injustice occurring below, including at the hand of the Nazis. Indeed, it shows to some extent God righting the wrongs occurring in the world. Still, God's reply leaves open the question whether God's actions are adequate given the horrors of the Shoah happening below.

Despite God telling the people the reason for God's tardiness, the people still endure unimaginable trauma. Beginning to realize they can no longer sit by as passive victims, they instead refuse to let their oppressors win. Thus in vs. 6-7, the people individually respond to God concerning their thoughts of the gods. Practicing *Kiddush ha-Hayyim*, they proclaim the death of the gods and the loss of the gods' responsibility for ruling the earth. This resolute speech accompanies the people's will to live. They no longer wait upon the gods for justice, including God. Instead, they take it upon themselves to enact justice by living despite the wicked's attempt to systematically slaughter the innocent.

Even though the people take it upon themselves to enact justice, in v. 8 they still urge God to rise and judge the earth. Their experience in the camps reminds them all too

52. Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 223.

well that they are but humans with limited power. The people need a greater power to fully deliver them. The people show in v. 8 that they still have hope, however small, that God has ultimate power to save them from their oppressors. In their minds they may question whether God does indeed own the whole world, but nevertheless they proclaim God's supremacy, wishing for God to take ownership of their circumstances so that God might change it from utter darkness to light.

This post-Shoah reading of Psalm 82 presents a different theodicy from the previous readings. It urges God to enact justice but acknowledges that sometimes God delays, such as in the Shoah. It offers little explanation for why God acts in this way, but instead turns to people to bring about justice. In turning to people, it does not exclude God. Indeed, it welcomes and yearns for God's help.[53] Until God comes, this dialogue between God and the people urges readers to find ways to presently resist injustice through their own lives.

Conclusion

Together, these three readings create a polyphony above the text. The location for the intersection of the plurality of consciousnesses is the text itself. The speakers of the different readings embody the different consciousnesses, simultaneously speaking as a chorus of voices. The author's voice, embodied in God in the historical-critical reading, has made way for the other voices, embodied in the gods and the people, which speak on equal level by means of the feminist and post-Shoah perspectives.

While God judges, the gods in the feminist perspective see the distance between God and injustice to be tenuous. They ask God, and by extension humans, to reflect on their relationship to injustice and to take responsibility for any tangential injustice. On the other hand, though the people in the post-Shoah reading acknowledge that there are questions concerning God's relationship to injustice, they do not linger on them. Instead the people ask their listeners to enact justice immediately lest injustice continue. In doing so, the people also urge God to join in creating justice, implying hope and faith in God's ability and necessity to create justice. Their hope leads back to the unwavering faith of the historical-critical reading. Though the feminist reading rightly challenges the historical-critical reading's theodicy, the historical-critical reading's faith in God provides a basis of hope for all other readings.

The dialogue resists systematization since each consciousness critiques the other consciousnesses. The critiques depend on the circumstances of the psalm, otherwise there is not a basis for the gods to retort or the people to cry out. At the same time, the dialogue is unfinalizable, because it invites readers to bring their own insights and critiques to the text from their own experiences of power and injustice. As such, this essay's reading of

53. Buber, 223.

Psalm 82 contains all the elements of a polyphonic text, challenging the theodicy of this otherwise monologic psalm.

Some final observations are in order concerning the polyphony present in this essay. Common to every reading is the exhortation in v. 8 for God to rise and judge the earth. No matter the accusations the readings fling at God, they return to a hope and faith in God's justice. This is reminiscent of Elie Wiesel's experience in a concentration camp of three rabbis' pronouncing God guilty of breaking the covenant, which they immediately follow with prayer.[54] Whatever ambiguity surrounds God's past actions, such an exclamation from the psalm speaking in conjunction with the rabbis shows great faith that God will save. Yet that faith is not finalized because the people still wait on God's justice.

Lastly, the readings' strength relies upon the preexistence of injustice. Injustice creates the occasion for the historical-critical reading to speak, and injustice subsequently draws the contemporary readings' critiques. If injustice never occurs from the outset, the occasion for judgment and complaint evaporates. Thus, the readings urge God and people to not simply fix injustice but keep injustice from ever happening. Doing so makes the need for theodicy void. Doing so eliminates blame and meaningless suffering. Instead, enacting justice from and unto perpetuity creates a world of peace for everyone.[55]

54. Dustin H. Faulstick, "Protest or Process: Theodicy Responses to Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God,*" *Renascence* 62, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 294.

55. Mafico, 1128.

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