

be glossed as “deities.”²¹ This reading is supported by the grammatically parallel use of *bənôt hā’ādām*, “daughters of the human,” or “women,” in Gen 6:2. This reading harmonizes with the variant construction *bənē ’ēlīm*, “deities,” in Pss 29:1 and 89:7.²²

The primary sense of *’ēlōhīm*, *’ēl*, and *’ēlōha* is thus the appellative sense “deity,” with *’ēlōhīm* carrying an additional abstract sense of “divinity” that could also be used in the adjectival genitive. This does not tell us much about what was understood by the term “deity,” though. To begin to fill in this picture, we may add the observation that *’ēlōhīm* is used not only in reference to the dead, but also to cultic objects (e.g., Gen 31:30; Exod 32:31; Judg 18:24; Isa 44:15).²³ While the use of terms for deity in reference to cultic objects was frequently sarcastic or intentionally put in the mouths of foreign or less pious individuals, there are multiple references to cultic objects as *’ēlōhīm* without any hint of polemic or irony.²⁴ We cannot so easily dismiss this usage. The term was also occasionally used in reference to humans with special authority or relationships with deity, as in the vocative references to the king *’ēlōhīm* in Ps 45:7–8, or in Exod 7:1 (*nətatīkā ’ēlōhīm ləpar’ōh*, “I have made you a deity to Pharaoh”), Isa 9:5 (*šəmō pele’ yō’ēš ’ēl gibōr*, “his name will be called Counselor of Wonder, Mighty Deity”), and Exod 4:16 (*wə’attā tihyeh-lō lē’lōhīm*, “and you will be to him a deity”).²⁵ Lest the *lamed* prefix in the final example be interpreted to be qualifying the divinity attributed to Moses (i.e., “you will be *like* a deity”; Wardlaw 2008, 108), note the *lamed* prefix in YHWH’s promise to Israel to be, *ləkā lē’lōhīm*, “to you a deity” (Gen 17:7; Deut 26:17; 29:12).

This suggests deity was fundamentally understood as a relational designation and not an ontological one. To the degree they performed the right functions and roles, the designation “deity” could extend to include the dead, humans, and even cultic objects. The ability to perform certain functions humans cannot normally perform is absolutely an aspect of that designation, but there is no reason that such

²¹ By analogy with, for example, *bənē hannəbī’im*, “children of the prophets” or “prophets” (1 Kgs 20:35), or *ben-’ādām*, “child of a human” or “human” (Ezek 8:5).

²² It should be noted that *bənē ’elyōn*, “children of Elyon,” in Ps 82:6 suggests a change in the sense of the offspring of the high deity, possibly under the influence of the broader Semitic tradition of the divine council inhabited by the offspring of El (Mullen Jr. 1980; Handy 1994; Smith 2001, 54–66). This text is quite late, however (see McClellan 2018).

²³ In light of this, the references in Exod 21:2–6 and 22:7–8 to appearing before *ha’ēlōhīm* may have reference to stelai located at city gates or by the entry to a house. While these references could be sarcastic in the exilic literature, they reflect the disputed boundaries of the concept. The prototype effects of “deity” will be discussed further below.

²⁴ For instance, Gen 35:2, 4 have Jacob and the narration itself refer to cultic objects as *’ēlōhē hannēkar*, “foreign deities.”

²⁵ See Lewis 2020, 505–7 for a discussion of these passages that borrows Irene Winter’s (2008, 88) notion of kings being “infused by the divine.”