

interchangeably in many places (e.g., Exod 20:3 // 34:14; Deut 32:21 // Hos 8:6; Ezek 28:2 // 9), and (3) no heightened sense of honor or majesty is demonstrable in any occurrence of *'ēlōhîm*.<sup>19</sup> The difference seems to be one of style, not sense (Burnett 2001, 24).

The most compelling explanation of this phenomenon comes from Joel Burnett (2001, 7–53), who argues that the most common use of *'ēlōhîm* is as a “concretized abstract plural.” That is, the abstract plural *'ēlōhîm* had the sense of “divinity,” but became concretized in reference to actual manifestations of divinity, and over time came to mean “deity.”<sup>20</sup> This final sense is synonymous with the primary senses of singular *'ēl* and *'ēlōha*, but as Burnett notes (2001, 57–60), an abstract nuance was preserved for *'ēlōhîm* and is evoked in some places. For instance, in 1 Kgs 11:33 the masculine plural *'ēlōhîm* appears in reference to a single feminine deity. The abstract sense of “deity” is gender neutral, while nonabstract “god” is masculine. While Biblical Hebrew does not explicitly attest to a word for “goddess”—leaving the author little choice—the masculine plural *'lm* in reference to singular feminine deities is also found in Phoenician, which does have a word for “goddess” (*'lt*) (Burnett 2001, 27). This is not definitive proof of the same usage in Hebrew, but it is suggestive, and it demonstrates the same construction in a cognate language that is not accounted for by the plural of majesty.

This theory also makes better sense of the use of *'ēlōhîm* as the *nomen rectum* in construct phrases. Rather than conjuring up a superlative sense for the term, for instance, we may understand it as the adjectival genitive. Thus *herdat 'ēlōhîm* (1 Sam 14:15) is not “a very great panic” (NRSV), but “divine panic,” or a panic caused by or associated with divine activity (Burnett 2001, 57–59; cf. Joïon and Muraoka 2006, §141*n*). Similarly, *bānê 'ēlōhîm*, traditionally translated “sons of God” (Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), is not necessarily a reference to the offspring of the high deity, but perhaps members of the class of deity, and could therefore

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is not “honorific,” or “majestic,” it just highlights whatever abstract semantic qualities the word evokes. In other words, it derives directly from the abstract plural (this is Gesenius’ explanation of the plural of majesty [1910, §124*g*]).

<sup>19</sup> The notion of intensification seems to sit at the root of most arguments for the plural of majesty (Waltke and O’Connor 1990, §7.4.3a–b; Wardlaw 2008, 104), with contradictory data dismissed as “exceptions” (Waltke and O’Connor 1990, §7.4.3b *n.* 16).

<sup>20</sup> In essence, the abstract sense expressed the salient abstract qualities associated with the noun. Concretization took place through the firm and repeated association of those qualities with some entity. Burnett (2001, 22) cites as another example of a concretized abstract plural the word *bātūlim* (Deut 22:15), meaning “evidences of virginity,” rather than the abstract “virginity.”