The Plural of Majesty in the Hebrew Bible:
Assessing the Extent of its Pervasiveness and the Implications for Monotheism

1 - INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for commentaries, Bible dictionaries, lexicons, and academic journal articles to speak of the "plural of majesty" as a literary concept within Biblical Hebrew. However, readers often experience a disconnect between their perception of what the term actually means and the comprehension that the authors of these reference works expect from their readers. Nicolas Lunn's recently published article (2016) in the *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* vocalizes this very problem–an inadequate attempt by the Hebrew reference grammars to define the various plural forms of intensification and abstraction.[1] Lunn observes that the Hebrew lexicons have offered a plethora of terms aimed at capturing the sense of plural forms that are singular in meaning, all under the assumption that these terms are more or less synonymous.[2] These terms include the plural of majesty, plural of excellence, plural of eminence, plural of intensification, plural of extension, plural of abstraction, plural of generalization, and the plural of result or composition.[3] With so many different terms, it is no wonder that interested readers of academic reference works often struggle to define, conceptualize, and even locate the plural of majesty within the Hebrew Bible. Many interpreters have thrown up their hands and outright dismissed claims that the plural of majesty is even present within the Hebrew Bible at all. Others acknowledge the presence of the plural of majesty but remain deeply skeptical about how frequently it appears. Another contributing problem is the reality that Biblical Hebrew courses have a smaller enrollment than Greek courses among students at graduate theological institutions.[4] Unfortunately, this results in fewer persons with an adequate grasp of advanced Hebrew concepts.

The primary purpose of this essay is to define the concept of the plural of majesty and determine how pervasive it is within the Hebrew Bible. This task will involve the definitions provided by the standard Hebrew grammars, theological dictionaries, and specialized studies. We will explore how the biblical authors employed the plural of majesty to describe Israel's God with various parts of speech: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. We will also examine how characteristics, qualities, and locations associated with Israel's God sometimes have plural forms with clear singular meanings. Additionally, we will demonstrate how the biblical authors portrayed human beings with the plural of majesty. Our study will then give attention to passages associated with

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[1] Nicholas P. Lunn, "Differentiating Intensive and Abstract Plural Nouns in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 42/1 (2016), 81-99, here 81.

[2] A simple compare and contrast of the standard Hebrew lexicons will demonstrate Lunn's complaint about synonymous definitions among the various terms. The plural of intensification and the plural of eminence are treated as synonymous categories in J.C.L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax,* 4th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 19, and John C. Beckman, "Pluralis Majestatis: Biblical Hebrew," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics,* ed. Geoffrey Khan, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 145. The two plural categories are distinguished by *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar,* ed. and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, 2nd ed., rev. by A.E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 396-99, and P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2018), 469-72.

[3] Other recent works of Hebrew grammar, like Mark D. Futato, *Beginning Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 16, simply describe the concept of plural nouns treated as singular in meaning without even pinning down a description of the Hebrew concept being taught.

[4] In 2021, Columbia Theological Seminary had three times the number of master's students enrolling in introductory Biblical Greek courses when compared to the enrollment for introductory Biblical Hebrew courses.

royalty and kingship that exhibit characteristics of the plural of majesty. Finally, we will observe how large primordial animals have plural forms with singular meanings. Once we assess how pervasive the plural of majesty is within the Hebrew Bible, we will discuss its implications for Jewish monotheistic theology, which is sure to be of interest to both Biblical Unitarians and those Unitarians holding to the literal preexistence of Jesus.

2 - DEFINING OUR TERMS

There has been a noticeable effort by Hebrew grammarians within the last ten years to provide an accurate definition of the "plural of majesty" appearing within the Hebrew Bible. Having mentioned Lunn's 2016 contribution, another noteworthy article was published in 2013 in the *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* entitled, "Pluralis Majestatis: Biblical Hebrew." In this entry, John Beckman offers a modern definition: "The term 'majestic plural' or *pluralis majestatis* refers to the use of a plural word to refer honorifically to a single person or entity. It is also called the plural of respect, the honorific plural, the plural of excellence, or the 'plural of intensity.'"[5] Beckman's definition, which is held by others,[6] effectively takes the various concepts described in the Hebrew reference grammars and acknowledges that these concepts refer to a single phenomenon wherein an individual person or thing is portrayed honorifically with a plural form. For the sake of this essay, we will operate according to the suitable definition that Beckman offers, thereby regarding the following terms as synonymous: plural of majesty, plural of intensity, honorific plural, and plural of excellence.

To add further clarity to the concept of plural of majesty, we must distinguish these plurals from the Hebrew abstract plural.[7] Plurals of abstraction are easily discernable because they have no occurrences within the Hebrew Bible with a singular form, appearing only with plural forms. This distinction between the plural of abstraction and the plural of majesty (and its functional synonyms) is quite significant, as the latter concerns words with both plural and singular forms.[8] Furthermore, the words that fall under the category of the plural of majesty tend to exhibit, as the descriptions above suggest, an intensive or majestic quality that is often associated with Israel's God, human persons bearing superior rank, and terms linked with royalty/kingship.[9] Words labeled as plurals of abstraction are ordinary words with no apparent sense of intensity, honor, or majesty.[10]

Having clarified what we mean by the plural of majesty, we can take notice of its appearances outside of the Hebrew Bible, including works of literature written in other languages.

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[5] Beckman, "Pluralis Majestatis: Biblical Hebrew," 145-6.

[6] Ronald Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax,* 3rd. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 2, argues that the plural of respect "is also called the honorific plural, the plural of majesty (*pluralis majestatis*), the plural of excellence (*pluralis excellentiae*), plural of intensity (*pluralis intensivus*), or the royal plural."

[7] Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 398-9; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 18-19; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 120-1; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 471.

[8] Lunn, "Differentiating Intensive and Abstract Plural Nouns in Biblical Hebrew," 89-90.

[9] The glossary in Christo H.J van der Merwe, Jackie Naude, and Jan Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006), 363, defines the Pluralis Majestatis as "someone or something is mighty, big, terrible or re-spectable (sic)."

[10] Examples of words classified as abstract plurals include: atonement, ordination, harlotry, adultery, youth, virginity, childlessness, security, sojourning, betrothal, love, desirableness, comfort, uprightness, mercifulness, smoothness, contempt, treacherousness, pain, death, blindness, sweetness, bitterness. For a larger list and a chart breaking down the frequency of each term among texts of narration, law, speech, and poetry, see Lunn, "Differentiating Intensive and Abstract Plural Nouns in Biblical Hebrew," 90-1.

Among the Ancient Near Eastern languages, the plural of majesty shows up in the 14th century BCE Akkadian *Armana Letters*.[11] Explicit occurrences of the plural of majesty appear in Ugaritic,[12] Assyrian, Phoenician, Ethiopic,[13] and many classical Greek works.[14] The historical work *1 Maccabees,* initially written in Hebrew, shows evidence in its Greek translation of the plural of majesty during the Greco-Roman period.[15] One modern dialect of Arabic continues to use the plural of majesty.[16] Since the grammatical concept appears in so many languages, it is not surprising that it appears in works outside of the Bible written in Hebrew and Aramaic, including the Dead Sea Scrolls,[17] the Jewish targums,[18] and Modern Hebrew.[19] In short, the plural of majesty was relatively widespread in influence, despite the occasional uninformed suggestion to the contrary.[20]

3 - PLURAL OF MAJESTY FOR GOD
3.1 ELOHIM
The most common Hebrew noun used by the biblical writers to portray Israel's God is *elohim* ("God"). Appearing over 2,600 times in the Hebrew Bible, *elohim* is the plural form of *eloah.* When referencing Yahweh, the biblical writers almost always use the plural form *elohim*, suggesting that there is something noteworthy about the God of Israel that demanded the plural form thousands of times in Biblical Hebrew rather than the singular form.[21] Older scholarship suggested that the plural noun *elohim* indicated evidence of polytheism within Israel's earliest

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[11] The Akkadian Armana Letters frequently use the plural to refer to a royal abode in an unambiguous singular sense. See William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Aaron Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* XXI.4 (1905), 228.

[12] The noun *ba'al* is used secularly in the plural to indicate individuals. See J.C. de Moor and M.J. Mulder, "ba'al," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol. 2, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 192.

[13] See the examples given in Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208.

[14] Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve and Charles W.E. Miller, *Syntax of Classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes,* vol. 1 (New York, American Book Co., 1900), 26, document the plural of majesty in the works of Plato, Homer, Isocrates, Xenophon, Thucydides, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Pindar.

[15] Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 398; e.g., the practice of singular kings writing with the first person plural: "King Alexander to his brother Jonathan, greetings. *We* have heard about you, that you are a mighty warrior and worthy to be our friend. And so *we* have appointed you today to be the high priest of your nation; you are to be called the king's friend and you are to take *our* side and keep friendship with *us*." (1 Macc. 10:18-20); "King Demetrius to his father Lasthenes, greetings. *We* have determined to do good to the nation of the Jews, who are *our* friends and fulfill their obligations to *us*, because of the goodwill they show toward *us*. *We* have confirmed as their possession both the territory of Judea and the three districts" (11:32-34).

[16] Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 469.

[17] Cf. the Qumran Isaiah scroll on Isa. 19:4 (*adonim* for a single monarch).

[18] The Targum reading of Isaiah describes a single fierce king with the plural *adonim* (19:4).

[19] Yael Reshef, "Pluralis Majestatis: Modern Hebrew," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics,* ed. Geoffrey Khan, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 146-7.

[20] E.g., Norman Walker, "Do Plural Nouns of Majesty Exist in Hebrew?" *Vetus Testamentum,* 7.2 (1957): 208, who insists that it is unproven that there are nouns exhibiting the plural of majesty.

[21] The singular *eloah* only appears fifty-seven times, forty-one of which are in Job. See also Jo Ann Hackett, *A Basic Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 71; Donald R. Vance, *An Introduction to Classical Hebrew* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 58.

history,[22] but modern scholarly treatments have entirely abandoned this hypothesis.[23] One crucial academic work is Aaron Ember's article on the plural of intensity within Biblical Hebrew, who after outright rejecting the older suggestion that *elohim* possesses an idea of plurality within the God of Israel, argues that *elohim*, "must rather be explained as an intensive plural, denoting greatness and majesty."[24]

Standard reference volumes have arrived at the same conclusion; when referring to the person of Yahweh, *elohim* designates not a plurality of persons, but a deliberate intensification–Yahweh is the great, highest, and only true God.[25] We can have confidence regarding *elohim* as the prime example of the plural of majesty because the biblical authors depicted Israel's God with over 20,000 singular references.[26] The biblical writers even portrayed false gods with *elohim* when referencing individual deities. [27] Modern biblical scholarship has arrived at the consensus that the use of the plural form *elohim* to refer to the God of Israel expresses the plural of majesty/intensity.[28]

Since *elohim* is the second most common noun in Biblical Hebrew, the plural of majesty within the Hebrew Bible is neither insignificant nor rare.[29] As the biblical authors so readily portrayed the true God—who is a single person—with the plural form of *eloah*, we conclude that there was a deliberate effort to describe God in majestic, excellent, and intensive strokes.[30] The fact that the most common noun depicting Yahweh is a plural of majesty is nothing short of noteworthy as we evaluate the extent of the concept's pervasiveness throughout the Hebrew Bible.

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[22] E.g., T. Rees, "God," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 1254.

[23] Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19, correctly observes, "This is not a survival of polytheism." Even Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399, was making this point back in 1813, "The supposition that *elohim* is to be regarded merely a remnant of earlier polytheistic views (i.e. as originally only a numerical plural) is at least highly improbable."

[24] Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208.

[25] Helmer Ringgren, "Elohim," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol. 1, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 272-3; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 397-8; William A. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 1977), 46; van der Merwe, Naude, and Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar,* 185; Allen Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 388.

[26] These singular references are verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and pronominal suffixes in both Hebrew and Aramaic. If we also count the singular references in the Greek Septuagint, the number would eclipse 35,000 times that Israel's God is portrayed as one person.

[27] E.g., "because they have forsaken Me, and have worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess (*elohim*) of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god (*elohim*) of Moab, and Milcom the god (*elohim*) of the sons of Ammon" (1 Kings 11:33). See also the comments by Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 212; BDB, 43, describes this as a, "pl. intensive."

[28] HALOT, 53; 122; C. Seow, "Names of God," *New Interpreters' Bible Dictionary of the Bible,* vol. 2, ed. Katharine Sakenfield (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 589; Beckman, "Pluralis Majestatis: Biblical Hebrewm" 145; David Baker, "Names of God," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch,* ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 361-2; Terence E. Fretheim, "Elohim," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis,* vol 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 405; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew,* 469-70; Martin Rose, "Names of God in the OT," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1006; Robert Bornemann, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 39; Karl Kutz and Rebecca Josberger, *Learning Biblical Hebrew* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 46.

[29] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 122, "Most honorific plurals in the Bible involve the God of Israel, and the most common of these is *elohim.*"

[30] C.L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 19, 96; J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 71; Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel, Vicki Hoffer, and Rebecca Abts Wright, *Biblical Hebrew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 10.

3.2 ADON

The Hebrew noun *adon* is a commonly employed reference to an ordinary master, sir, or lord, emphasizing lordship within a sphere of influence.[31] Sometimes, the biblical authors portrayed Yahweh with the plural form of *adon,* namely *adonim.* The attribution of the plural *adonim* to Israel's God is another example of the plural of majesty—a fact that standard Hebrew reference works recognise.[32] A few examples will sufficiently demonstrate that *adonim* characterizes Israel's God as a single person rather than a numerical plural. Malachi 1:6 records one such occurrence:

> "Then if I am a father, where is My honor?
> And if I am a master (*adonim*), where is My respect?"
> says the LORD of hosts.

Yahweh describes himself as a father, and in parallel to "father," he states that he is a master by using the plural form *adonim.* Even though "master" is grammatically plural, the parallelism indicates that *adonim* refers to a single person, one father.[33] Furthermore, the passage is bursting with singular references; first-person pronouns, singular pronominal suffixes linked with "honor" and "respect," and a singular verb. Even the Septuagint (LXX) translated *adonim* into a single master, demonstrating that the plural of majesty was recognized and carried forward into Greek.[34]

Another example of the plural *adonim* appearing as a plural of majesty occurs in Deuteronomy 10:17:

> "For the LORD your God,
> He is the God of gods
> And the Lord (*adonim*) of lords (*adonim*),
> The great one, the mighty one, and the awesome one
> who does not show partiality nor take a bribe."

Adonim appears twice in this passage; Yahweh is the Lord (*adonim*) of lords (*adonim*). English translations render the first plural reference as a singular Lord while the second is a proper numerical plural. When referring to Yahweh, the plural *adonim* is a plural of majesty, indicating only one person. The LXX confirms our findings, as the translator rendered the phrase into Greek as, "the Lord of lords."[35] Since the biblical author employed an independent singular pronoun for

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[31] Baker, "Names of God," 364; Gordon Johnson, "Adon," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis,* vol 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 257.

[32] Otto Eissfeldt, "adhon," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol. 1, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 62; Johnson, "Adon," 258; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; Kutz and Josberger, *Learning Biblical Hebrew,* 46. See also the extensive study in Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208.

[33] Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi,* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 309; Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 175; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco: Word, 1984), 208-12; Mignon R. Jacobs, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi,* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 185.

[34] LXX: κύριός εἰμι ἐγώ.

[35] LXX: κύριος τῶν κυρίων.

Yahweh ("he"), singular adjectives ("great" and "mighty"), and singular verbs, we can soundly conclude that *adonim* is functionally singular–a plural of majesty.[36]

3.3 ADONAI

The noun *Adonai* ("Lord," "my Lord") is semantically related to *adonim* in that *Adonai* is a first-person singular pronominal suffix added to the majestically plural *adonim*.[37] However, the high-frequency count of *Adonai* and the manner in which the Jews used it as a circumlocution for the divine name require its own space for investigation.[38] *Adonai* appears 449 times in the Hebrew Bible to portray Israel's God. While the term is grammatically plural, its usage for God by the biblical authors indicates that, like *adonim, Adonai* is a prime example of the plural of majesty.[39] We can demonstrate this point by noting the singular verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and pronominal suffixes that *Adonai* governs. Take, for example, David's prayer in 2 Samuel 7:22:

> For this reason, You are great,
> O Lord God (*Adonai Yahweh*);
> for there is none like You,
> and there is no God besides You.

In this passage, the plural *Adonai* takes a singular verb ("to be great") and two singular suffixes ("you"), indicating that *Adonai Yahweh* is a single individual. If *Adonai* was a numerical plural, Hebrew grammar would demand plural verb and plural pronominal suffixes. Furthermore, the LXX converts *Adonai* to a single Lord, indicating an awareness of the plural of majesty.[40] In Psalm 16:2, we detect a similar case:

> I said to the LORD,
> "You are my Lord (*Adonai*);
> I have no good besides You."

The psalmist describes *Adonai* with a singular pronoun ("you") and a singular pronominal suffix ("you"). Additionally, the LXX translator rendered the plural *Adonai* as an individual "Lord."[41] The natural conclusion to draw from these singular references is that the biblical authors and the Septuagint translators regarded *Adonai* as another example of the plural of majesty for Israel's God.

Both of these biblical examples regard the plural *Adonai* as a suitable synonym for the paralleled divine name, Yahweh. As the general usage of the divine name became less frequent in

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[36] Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991); 431; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 122-3; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19. Further examples of *adonim* referring to the one true God in a manner that demonstrates the plural of majesty include 1 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chron. 18:16; Neh. 10:30; Pss. 8:1; 136:3.

[37] HALOT, 13; Baker, "Names of God," 364; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 124; Eissfeldt, "adhon," 63.

[38] van der Merwe, Naude, and Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar,* 186, rightly notes that *Adonai* needs to be distinguished from the forms of *adon* used to refer to human persons.

[39] Julia M. O'Brian, "Adonai," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 74; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 124; Bornemann, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew,* 233.

[40] LXX: κύριέ μου.

[41] LXX: κύριός μου.

the Second Temple period, Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible began using *Adonai* as the primary circumlocution.[42] Since the divine name appears over 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible, the choice to substitute *Adonai* for Yahweh indicates a widespread acceptance of a plural of majesty word for the one true God. The high-frequency count makes the use of *Adonai* for Yahweh the most prominent Qere/Ketib example in the Hebrew language.[43] Since conservative Jews chose to say *Adonai* instead of the divine name in the Second Temple period and continue to do so on into the present day, there is a long history of using a plural word to refer to a single divine person.

3.4 THE HOLY ONE

Another designation for the God of Israel is the adjective *qadosh,* which regularly appears in the singular: "the Holy One." While the typical use of the singular form indicates that the holy God is a single person, a few passages use the plural form of the adjective: *qedoshim.* While modern scholars agree in classifying the use of the plural form *qedoshim* for the God of Israel as a plural of majesty,[44] the passages in question are nevertheless worthy of examination. The first example is in Joshua 24:19, which links the plural adjective to God:

> But Joshua said to the people,
> "You cannot serve the LORD,
> for He is a holy (*qedoshim*) God.
> He is a jealous God;
> He will not forgive your transgression or your sins."

Although the adjective "holy" and the related noun *elohim* are plurals, Hebrew reference grammars point to this passage as evidence of the plural of majesty.[45] This conclusion is drawn from the many singular indicators in this verse, including a singular verb ("forgive"), a singular adjective ("jealous"), and a singular pronoun ("he").[46] Additional confirmation comes from the parallel use of *elohim*–a known plural of majesty–with the singular *el* ("God"). Moreover, the LXX demonstrates that the translator, who rendered the plural *qedoshim* with the singular Greek adjective, identified the plural of majesty.[47]

In three other passages (Hos. 11:12; Prov. 9:10; 30:3), the biblical authors employed the plural adjective *qedoshim* to almost certainly reflect an understanding of the plural of majesty. In Hosea 11:12, the prophet declares:

> "Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,
> and the house of Israel with deceit;
> but Judah still walks with God,

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[42] Seow, "Names of God," 592; Rose, "Names of God in the OT," 1010.

[43] Ludwig Köehler, *Old Testament Theology,* Library of Theological Translations (Cambridge: James Clark and Co., 2002), 30; Eissfeldt, "adhon", 30. This can already be observed in the Masoretic vowel pointings of Yahweh in printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. When the noun Yahweh is prefixed with a preposition, the preposition's vowel will shift to a Qames ("A") in order to remind the reader that *Adonai* is to be spoken instead.

[44] Seow, "Names of God," 594, calls the use of the plural form when used to describe God a plural of majesty.

[45] Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399.

[46] The biblical author placed the singular pronoun הוא in a manner syntactically so as to not have the readers conclude that *qedoshim* is a numerical plural. I am not aware of any commentary that suggests that the plural adjective refers to a numerical plurality within the God of Israel.

[47] LXX: ἅγιός.

and is faithful to the Holy One (*qedoshim*)."

Specialists focusing on the Book of Hosea have not interpreted the plural adjective *qedoshim* as a genuine numerical plural, translating it in the singular instead.[48] The designation "Holy One" parallels the singular *el,* indicating that the adjective should also be a singular reference. The singular verb and the singular pronominal suffix confirm this interpretation, as does the evidence observable in the LXX where the singular Greek adjective was employed.[49] It seems safe to follow the scholarly consensus by concluding that Hosea's reference to Israel's God as "the Holy One" with a plural adjective is a discernable plural of majesty.[50]

Two occurrences of the plural adjective *qedoshim* used for Israel's God appear in the Book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 9:10, we observe helpful parallelism:

> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
> and the knowledge of the Holy One (*qedoshim*) is insight.

The sage sets Yahweh alongside the reference to the Holy One, which suggests that the plural *qedoshim* refers to a single holy person. There are no further singular references in the text to confirm our suspicion, and the LXX rendered the Hebrew "knowledge of the Holy One" as the "counsel of the saints," a translation decision that effectively removed the parallelism within the Hebrew. So while the plural is maintained in Greek, it no longer describes God, which indicates that the translator was not trying to suggest that Yahweh is a plurality of persons. Scholars and standard Hebrew lexicons have taken stock of the parallelism in the Hebrew between Yahweh—a single individual—and the plural adjective *qedoshim* and concluded that the plural of majesty is what the biblical author intended.[51] A remarkably comparable passage appears towards the end of the collection of Proverbs:

> Neither have I learned wisdom,
> nor have I the knowledge of the Holy One (*qedoshim*) (Prov. 30:3).

Again, the sage employed a plural adjective to describe God. Like the previous passage in 9:10, Prov. 30:3 sets wisdom and knowledge in synonymous parallelism, but there is no parallel to the reference to the Holy One with which we might discern his identity. We can find some helpful pointers in the following verse (30:4), where the biblical author describes the Holy One with four singular references ("his fists," "his garment," "his name," "his son's name"). This evidence has convinced grammarians and scholars that the plural reference *qedoshim* in Prov. 30:3 is a plural of majesty–referring to a single holy person.[52]

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[48] E.g., J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 295.

[49] The LXX uses the singular ἅγιος while shifting the reference to the holy λαὸς.

[50] Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208; Seow, "Names of God," 592; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; HALOT*,* 1067.

[51] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 18A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 308; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208; Seow, "Names of God," 592; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 122-3; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; HALOT*,* 1067.

[52] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 18B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 855; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in

3.5 THE CREATOR

One of the most significant distinguishing characteristics of the God of Israel is that he is the creator. The Hebrew Bible uses verbs to express this description–singular participial verbs that translate literally to: "the one who creates." English translations continue to render these verbs into a noun ("the creator," "the maker"). While most of these occurrences have singular verbs portraying the creator as only one person, a few passages have plural participial verbs. Scholars continue to regard these peculiar occurrences of the plural verb as further evidence for the plural of majesty since the one who is powerful enough to create is undeniably majestic, honorable, and excellent. One such passage occurs in Job 35:10, where the Hebrew verb *asah* ("to make") is a plural participle:

> But no one says,
> "Where is God my Maker (*asah*),
> who gives songs in the night"

In this passage, the biblical author links the plural verb *asah* with a singular noun for God: *eloah.* This connection suggests that the plural verb for "my Maker" is unlikely to be a numerical plural (i.e., "my Makers"). We can find further confirmation that the "Maker" in this passage refers to a single person by taking note of the singular verb ("give"), which even the Septuagint maintains.[53] For these reasons, commentators and Hebrew grammars regularly classify the plural verb in Job 35:10 as a plural of majesty.[54] We can draw a similar conclusion in Psalm 149:2, where the verb *asah* again appears as the plural participle:

> Let Israel be glad in its Maker (*asah*)*;*
> let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

The plural verb is parallel to a single monarch, "their king," signifying again that the plural of majesty is in effect here. The translator of the LXX seems to have arrived at the same conclusion, as evidenced by his rendering of the plural Hebrew verb into a singular Greek verb accompanied by a singular definite article.[55] English translations and commentators have followed suit in seeing a plural of majesty here.[56]

Isaiah 40-55 is a well-known hub of fiercely monotheistic passages. Within this section, we observe another instance where *asa* is a plural participle:

> For your husband is your Maker (*asa*),
> Whose name is the LORD of hosts;

Hebrew," 208; Seow, "Names of God," 592; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; HALOT*,* 1067.

[53] LXX has ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας με.

[54] David J.A. Clines, *Job 21-37,* Word Biblical Commentary 18A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 790; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Gesenius; Gibson, *Hebrew* Grammar, 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; van der Merwe, Naude, and Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar,* 185.

[55] LXX has τῷ ποιήσαντι.

[56] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150,* Word Biblical Commentary 21 (Waco: Word, 1983), 318; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, tr. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 642; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19.

And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
Who is called the God of all the earth. (Isa. 54:5)

This passage is fascinating because there are two plural references for Yahweh; "husband" (participial verb *ba'al*) and "Maker" (*asah*). To suggest that Yahweh is a plurality of husbands by insisting on a strict numerical plural of *ba'al* would invite more confusion than clarity. Undoubtedly the covenant God acts as an individual husband figure to Israel the bride, so the plural is probably a plural of majesty.[57] The rest of the passage indicates that Yahweh is a single person with singular references ("the one who redeems," "the Holy One," "who is called"). It makes sense to interpret the two plural references together, not separately. The Greek translator of this passage recognized a plural of majesty taking place in both verbs, electing to render them both as singulars.[58] Perhaps the two Hebrew participles appear in plural forms for poetic and stylistic reasons. John Goldingay helpfully observes that both participles rhyme and share the same form.[59] Commentators and all modern English translations have concluded that these two participles are not proper numerical plurals but refer to a single person—plurals of majesty.[60]

Another verb that almost always has a singular subject, *bara* ("to create"), sometimes appears as a singular participle, "the one who creates."[61] In Ecclesiastes 12:1, however, the participial verb has a plural subject:

Remember also your Creator (*bara*) in the days of your youth,
before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say,
"I have no delight in them."

Although the passage does not have any other references to the God of Israel from which we may gather clues, there seems to be a universal scholarly consensus that the plural participle *bara* should read as a singular.[62] The Septuagint translator drew this conclusion,[63] and modern English translations have followed suit in portraying only one creator here, not multiple creators.[64]

We should take note of another passage where the verb *bara* appears, although this passage sets the singular *bara* in parallel with a description of the creator "stretching" out the heavens:

Thus says God the LORD,
Who created the heavens
and stretched (*natah*) them out,
Who spread out the earth and its offspring,

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[57] Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470.

[58] LXX: κύριος ὁ ποιῶν

[59] John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* International Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) 346.

[60] Joseph Blenkensopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 19B (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 359; R.N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66,* New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 185; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470.

[61] Isaiah. 40:28; 42:5; 65:17, 18.

[62] Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth,* A Continental Commentary, tr. Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2002), 139; Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word, 1992), 113; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, tr. O.C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 190; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399.

[63] The LXX understood the plural verb to refer to a single creator: τοῦ κτίσαντός.

[64] I am not aware of any English translation that translate the plural verb as a true plural.

Who gives breath to the people on it
And spirit to those who walk in it (Isa. 42:5).

The biblical prophet portrays Yahweh as the one who created the heavens and who stretches them out, using a plural participial verb (*natah*) to describe the act of stretching. This sole plural reference to the creative actions of Yahweh sits among four singular verbs ("says," "creates," "spreads," "gives"). Additionally, the LXX translator converted the Hebrew plural act of stretching into a singular Greek aorist participle in agreement with the other singular verbs.[65] Since it seems wise to not pit one plural verb against four singular verbs, we should follow the practice of commentators, Hebrew reference grammars, and English translations in classifying the act of stretching as a plural of majesty.[66]

3.6 CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL

The biblical authors frequently portrayed Israel's God with qualities and attributes that are plural in form, but singular in meaning. Having taken note of the many references for God that function as plurals of majesty, these divine qualitied begin to make sense:

i.	<u>knowledge</u>	For truly my words are not false; One who is perfect in knowledge (דֵּעוֹת) is with you (Job 36:4);[67]
ii.	<u>Wisdom</u>	Wisdom (חָכְמוֹת) has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars (Prov. 9:1);[68]
iii.	<u>wrath</u>	For the wicked is reserved for the day of calamity; they will be led forth at the day of wrath (עֲבָרוֹת). (Job 21:30);[69]
iv.	<u>terror</u>	It is drawn forth and comes out of his back, even the glittering point from his gall. Terror (אֵמִים) comes upon him (Job 20:25);[70]

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[65] LXX: οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς …πήξας.

[66] John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* International Critical Commentary, vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 225; Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40-66,* Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 187, "does not denote plurality"; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19.

[67] Clines, *Job 21-37,* 810. Other examples of the plural noun "knowledge" used in a singular sense for God include Job 37:16; 1 Sam. 2:3.

[68] Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; Alice Ogden Bellis, *Proverbs,* Wisdom Commentary, vol. 23 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), 91; Fox, *Proverbs 1-9,* 96-7, 296; Bernd U. Schipper, *Proverbs 1-15,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, tr. Stephen Germany (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 325. The plural of majesty used of "wisdom" also appears in Prov. 1:20.

[69] Other examples of the plural noun "wrath" used in a singular sense for God include Job 40:11; Psa. 7:6.

[70] The associated verb *halak,* which governs the plural use of terror, is singular. See the discussion in David J.A. Clines, *Job 1-20,* Word Biblical Commentary 17 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 478.

v.	<u>vision (of God)</u>	God spoke to Israel in a vision (מַרְאֹת)[71] of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am" (Gen. 46:2);[72]
vi.	<u>strength</u>	Look down from heaven and see from Your holy and glorious habitation; Where are Your zeal and Your strength (גְּבוּרֹתֶךָ)?[73] (Isa. 63:15);[74]
vii.	<u>deliverance</u>	We were pregnant, we writhed in labor, We gave birth, as it seems, only to wind. We could not accomplish deliverance (יְשׁוּעֹת)[75] for the earth (Isa. 26:18);[76]
viii.	<u>vengeance</u>	So she said to him, "My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has delivered vengeance (נְקָמוֹת)[77] for you upon your enemies, the sons of Ammon." (Jdg. 11:36);[78]
ix.	<u>help</u>	The LORD is with me as my helper (עֹזְרָי)[79] (Ps. 118:7).[80]

Although the list above is not exhaustive, it is sufficient to demonstrate that the use of plural words with singular meanings by the biblical authors extends to characteristics and qualities of Israel's God.

3.7 NOTEWORTHY THINGS PERTAINING TO GOD

The Hebrew Bible employs a variety of words to express the location of God's presence, abode, and even his means of transportation. The biblical authors sometimes portrayed these words with plural Hebrew forms while the numerical singular was almost certainly intended:

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[71] LXX has the singular ὁράματι τῆς νυκτὸς, indicating that the Greek translator understood the plural visions as a singular—as a plural of majesty.

[72] Other examples of the plural noun "vision" used in a singular sense for God include Ezek. 1:1; 8:3 (LXX singular); 40:2 (LXX singular). Nahum Sarna, *Genesis,* The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 313, "plural seems to express the intensity of the experience"; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: a Commentary,* tr. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 152, describes this as a plural with a singular meaning; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50,* Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 436, calls this a plural of intensity; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50,* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 588; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar,* 398.

[73] LXX has the singular ἡ ἰσχύς σου.

[74] Paul, *Isaiah 40-66,* 576-77; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible Commentary 19B (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 255. Other examples of the plural noun "strength" used in a singular sense for God include Psa. 68:36; Isa. 40:26. Further references are listed in Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 397.

[75] LXX has the singular πνεῦμα σωτηρίας σου.

[76] Other examples of the plural noun "deliverance" used in a singular sense for God include also Isa. 33:6 (LXX has singular); Psa. 42:11 (LXX singular); 43:5 (LXX singular). See the comment in Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar,* 398.

[77] LXX has the singular ἐκδίκησιν.

[78] Another example of the plural noun "vengeance" used in a singular sense for God is 2 Sam. 4:8 (LXX has singular).

[79] LXX has the singular βοηθός.

[80] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Allen, *Psalms 101-150,* 120; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3,* 229.

i.	The temple of God	O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling places (מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ) (Ps. 43:3);[81]
ii.	The Holy Mountain	His foundation is in the holy mountains (בְּהַרְרֵי). The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. (Ps. 87:1-3);[82]
iii.	Jerusalem	Your holy cities (עָרֵי קָדְשְׁךָ) have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. (Isa. 64:10);[83]
iv.	Heavenly Abode	The One who builds His upper chambers (מַעֲלוֹתָו)[84] in the heavens, and he has founded His vaulted dome over the earth (Amos 9:6);[85]
v.	The Throne Chariot	For behold, the LORD will come in fire and His chariot (מַרְכְּבֹתָיו) like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury (Isa. 66:15).[86]

The temple, temple mount, city of Jerusalem, the heavenly abode, and the throne chariot of God are plural in form but, arguably, singular in intended meaning.

3.8 ARAMAIC EXAMPLES OF THE PLURAL OF MAJESTY FOR GOD

As we already demonstrated above, the use of the plural of majesty was present in many Ancient Near Eastern languages. As such, the Aramaic portions of the Hebrew Bible contained evidence of the use of plural forms with singular meanings for the God of Israel.[87]

> But the holy ones of the Most High (עֶלְיוֹנִין)[88] shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever–forever and ever. (Dan. 7:18);

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[81] Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1: 1-50,* Anchor Bible Commentary 16 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 262; Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1-50*, 328; F. Delitzsch, *Psalms,* tr. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 61-2. Further references include Pss. 46:4; 68:35; 73:16-17; 84:1; 132:7 and those listed by Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 211.

[82] See also Ps. 133:3; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 198.

[83] Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 199; John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66,* Word Biblical Commentary 25 (Waco: Word, 1987), 336, "clearly plural…then it focusses specifically on the desolate condition of Zion/Jerusalem."

[84] LXX saw in the plural reference a plural of majesty and translated the Hebrew into the singular ἀνάβασιν αὐτοῦ.

[85] These plural upper chambers are set in parallel to the singular vaulted dome. See also Ps. 104:3; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah,* Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 389-93; James Luther Mays, *Amos,* The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 155; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 202.

[86] See also Hab. 3:8; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 212; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66,* 308, "the figure is YHVH riding on a chariot through the sky."

[87] Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 208, notes all of these listed Aramaic references reflect the plural of intensity.

[88] Both the LXX and Theodotian translation rendered this plural reference as a singular.

then judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High (עֶלְיוֹנִין),[89] and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom. (Dan. 7:22);

He shall speak words against the Most High, shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High (עֶלְיוֹנִין)[90] (Dan. 7:25);
The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High (עֶלְיוֹנִין)[91] (Dan. 7:27).

Scholars regularly discern the plural of majesty in this particular hub of Aramaic references to the Most High God.[92]

4 - PLURAL OF MAJESTY FOR HUMAN BEINGS
4.1 ELOHIM

Having already observed that the plural noun *elohim* was employed over 2,500 times by the biblical authors to express the majesty of the God of Israel, we can turn to examine the noteworthy occurrences where the same plural noun refers to singular human beings.[93] Since these human individuals act as authorized agents of Israel's God, the biblical authors felt that it was appropriate to use *elohim*–a noun demonstrated to be the most common plural of majesty reference in the Hebrew Bible–to describe individual beings.[94]

In Exodus 4:16, God tells Moses that he will function as "God" (*elohim*) to Aaron.[95] A few chapters later, God declares that he has made Moses *elohim* to Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1).[96] The sense seems to be that Moses, functioning as the prophetic agent of God, can bear the majestically plural

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[89] The translators of the LXX and the Theodotian interpreted this plural reference as a singular.

[90] The first reference to the Most High is singular in Aramaic, while the second reference–which is connected to the holy ones–is plural. Both references to the Most High were translated in the singular in the LXX and Theodotian.

[91] LXX and Theodotian translated the plural as a singular.

[92] John J. Collins, *Daniel,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 312; Carol A. Newsom and Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary,* The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 215; James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel,* International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1989), 308; Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1966), 61; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19. John Goldingay, *Daniel,* Word Biblical Commentary 30 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 146, notes that this is "the usual view."

[93] Matthew Oseka, "A Textual Study of the Passages Containing Plural Forms Related to the Generic Name of God and to the Tetragrammaton in the Pentateuch," *Vox Scripturae* 24.2 (2016), 24, openly aknowledges that *elohim* can refer to human agents.

[94] The use of *elohim* to refer to individual human beings is acknowledged by the standard Hebrew lexicons; HALOT, 53; BDB, 43.

[95] Brian Britt, *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text,* JSOT Sup 402 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 118; Carol Meyers, *Exodus,* The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 62; William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19,* Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2014), 112; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus,* The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 22; G.I. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Exodus 1-18,* vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 336.

[96] Wayne A. Meeks, "Moses as God and King," in *Religions in Antiquity,* Supplement to *Numen* 14 (Leiden: Brill 1968), 360; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus,* Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1, tr. by Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra, Leuven: Peeters, 1993, 523; Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19,* 155; Sarna, *Exodus,* 36; John Durham, *Exodus,* Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 87; Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Exodus 1-18,* vol 1, 461-2.

title *elohim,* despite being only a single individual. The same phenomenon arguably appears in Ps. 45:6, where the Davidic king ruling on behalf of Israel's God is called *elohim.*[97] These examples demonstrate that the concept of the plural of majesty extended to noteworthy human beings acting as authorized agents of Israel's God.[98]

4.2 ADON

Just as the biblical authors employed the plural *elohim* to express the plural of majesty for both the God of Israel and individual human agents of God, we can discern the same with the plural noun *adonim.*[99] The use of *adonim* for individual human beings is quite common in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting an almost casual attitude towards the use of the plural of majesty for noteworthy persons,[100] particularly high-ranking individuals, kings (Israelite and Gentile), and landowners:

> "Have you not heard that Adonijah the son of Haggith has become king, and David our lord (*adonim*)[101] does not know it? (1 Kings 1:11);[102]

> But Jonathan replied to Adonijah, "No! Our lord (*adonim*) King David has made Solomon king." (1 Kings 1:43);[103]

> he named the city which he built Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the owner (*adonim*) of the hill. (1 Kings 16:24);[104]

> I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master (*adonim*);
> a fierce king will rule over them (Isa. 19:4).[105]

Although the data is far more extensive,[106] this sampling demonstrates the use of *adonim*—a plural word—for individual human persons.

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[97] Mark S. Smith, "Canaanite Backgrounds to the Psalms," *The Oxford Handbook on the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47; Nancy Declaisse-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Beth Tanner, *The Book of Psalms,* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 419-20; Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1-50,* Word Biblical Commentary 19, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 336-7; James Limburg, *Psalms,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 151; Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72,* Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002(, 224; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary,* The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 363.

[98] One might add the example in Dan. 2:36 where the divinely-inspired interpreter of dreams, Daniel, says, "we will tell its interpretation before the king."

[99] van der Merwe, Naude, and Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar,* 186.

[100] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123.

[101] LXX has the singular lord here.

[102] Eissfeldt, "adhon", 61.

[103] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Johnson, "Adon", 258; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19.

[104] Johnson, "Adon", 258.

[105] Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Johnson, "Adon", 258; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 257; J.J.M. Roberts, *First Isaiah,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 254; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible Commentary 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 312-3; Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax,* 3.

[106] For more occurrences of the use of the plural *adonim* for individual human beings, see Gen. 24:9, 10 (twice), 51; 39:2, 3, 7, 8, 16, 19; 40:7; 42:30, 33; Exod. 21:4, 6 (twice); Deut. 23:15 (twice); Jdg. 19:11, 12, 27; 1 Sam. 20:38; 25:10; 29:4; 2 Sam. 11:9, 13; 1 Kings 11:23; 2 Kings 5:1, 25; 6:32; 8:14; 9:11, 31; 19:4, 6; 2 Chron. 13:6; Prov. 25:13; 27:18; 30:10 (qere); Isa. 37:4; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399.

4.3 BA'AL

The noun *ba'al* refers to an ordinary owner, master, lord, or husband.[107] The biblical authors sometimes employed the plural form of the noun for human individuals, allowing us to categorize these occurrences alongside the majestically plural *elohim* and *adonim* used for human beings.[108] The use of a plural *ba'al* to highlight individual human persons is further evidence that the plural of majesty extended far more extensively than simply to refer to the God of Israel:

> If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner (*ba'alim*)[109] has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner (*ba'alim*) also shall be put to death. (Exod. 21:29);[110]

> The ox knows its owner (*ba'alim*),[111] and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand (Isa 1:3).[112]

Further references to *ba'al* used as the plural of majesty include Job 31:39[113] and Ecclesiastes 7:12.[114]

5 - PLURAL OF MAJESTY FOR ROYALTY

A few references can demonstrate the extent to which biblical authors used the plural of majesty to depict human royalty and kingship within the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures:

> So David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded your lord (*adonim*) the king? For one of the people came to destroy the king your lord (*adonim*). (1 Sam. 26:15);[115]

> Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the king (מַלְכִים). Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor (Ezra 4:13-14)[116]

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[107] HALOT, 142-5.

[108] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470; van der Merwe, Naude, and Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar,* 186.

[109] LXX has the singular *kurios* for both occurrences.

[110] de Moor and Mulder, "ba'al", 182; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 518.

[111] LXX rendered the plural noun as a singular: τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ.

[112] Roberts, *First Isaiah,* 14; John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33,* Word Biblical Commentary 24 (Waco: Word, 1985), 17, "could be a plural of majesty"; Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 399; de Moor and Mulder, "ba'al," 182; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123.

[113] The plural *ba'alim* was recognized as a plural of majesty within the LXX, where the singular *kurios* was used.

[114] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 123; Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 134-137. The plural *ba'alim* was rendered in the Greek translation of the LXX with a singular object of a verb, indicating a recognition of the plural of majesty at play here.

[115] Johnson, "Adon," 258. The LXX consistently rendered the plural *adonim* as the singular κύριόν σου.

[116] Authorities regularly discuss the problems of the plural form here, e.g., H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah,* Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Waco: Word, 1985), 56; HALOT, 1917, notes the error in reading this noun as a numerical plural. The plural reference is translated as a singular in NJB, CSB, ESV, NAB, NET, NRSV, RSV, JSP. See a similar occurrence of the plural of majesty in Ezra 4:22.

It is an abomination for a king (*melakim*)[117] to commit wickedness,
for a throne is established on righteousness. (Prov. 16:12).

These plural references for an individual human lord and king further indicate the pervasiveness of the plural of majesty concept.

6 - PLURAL OF MAJESTY FOR ANIMALS OF GREATNESS

Biblical poets sometimes portrayed massive, primordial beasts with plural forms. For example, the mighty *behemoth* is the plural of the noun *behemah,* while clearly referring to a single animal–a colossal monster.[118] The Book of Job depicts the plural noun *behemoth* to refer to an individual animal:

> Behold now, Behemoth, which I made as well as you;
> He eats grass like an ox.
> Behold now, his strength in his loins
> And his power in the muscles of his belly. (Job 40:15-16);[119]

In Psalm 89:10, the sea monster *Rahab* is set alongside a plural reference: God's enemies.[120] Since *Rahab* is singular, this suggests that the plural reference to enemies is probably another plural of majesty—an individual sea monster:[121]

> You Yourself crushed Rahab like one who is slain;
> You scattered Your enemies with Your mighty arm.

Another significant mythical animal is the sea dragon *Leviathan*. The poet speaks in Psalm 74:13-14 about a time in primordial lore when the true God crushed the heads of sea monsters. In parallel to these many monsters, the psalm refers to a single sea beast, *Leviathan*:

> You broke the heads of the sea monsters in the waters.
> You crushed the heads of *Leviathan*;
> You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

The singular pronoun ("him") further indicates that the reference to multiple monsters is likely a plural of majesty.[122]

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[117] The adjective *rasha* is singular as well as the noun "throne," suggesting that the plural noun "kings" should be understood as a plural of majesty. The LXX even has a singular reference to a king in both the current passage and in the context (LXX 16:13).

[118] G. Johannes Botterweck, "behemah," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol. 2, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 17, "pl. of extension"; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job,* The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 564.

[119] David J.A. Clines, *Job 38-42,* Word Biblical Commentary 18B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 1149; HALOT, 112 ("plural of extension"); Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 122; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 205; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470.

[120] HALOT, 1193.

[121] Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 204.

[122] Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 122; Ember, "The Pluralis Intensivus in Hebrew," 203-4; Gibson, *Hebrew Grammar,* 19; Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 470.

7 - SUMMARY OF THE DATA AND REFLECTIONS

This essay set out to ascertain the extent to which the grammatical concept called the plural of majesty—words that are plural in form but singular in meaning—encompasses the Hebrew Bible. We observed that the biblical authors used a variety of nouns (*elohim*, *adonim*, *Adonai*) in plural forms to refer to the God of Israel, who is an individual person. These nouns total up to more than 3,000 occurrences. If we allow the addition of the use of *Adonai* as a respectful circumlocution for the divine name, then we may add more than 6,800 occurrences to our total. Furthermore, we observed the plural of majesty in instances of the adjective *qedoshim,* referring to a holy God. Additionally, we observed Hebrew verbs for God that are grammatically plural with singular meanings—a conclusion that modern scholars broadly share.[123] We then perceived nine characteristics portraying Israel's God, explored several holy locations, and examined the throne chariot. All of these occurrences indicated that plural forms were used with a singular meaning, signifying that the plural of majesty extended beyond the names of Israel's God. We also studied the Aramaic evidence within the Hebrew Bible and observed the grammatical concept therein. While it is altogether striking that the biblical authors expanded the plural of majesty to include remarkable human beings, instances of royalty/kingship, and even large animals, most of the evidence addressed the person of Israel's God. If we count the practice of using *Adonai* as a substitute for Yahweh, then the biblical authors employed the grammatical concept of the plural of majesty over 10,000 times.

Having gathered our data, it is beneficial that we look for patterns. We can reasonably ask what sort of literature within the Hebrew Bible shows the most frequent use of the plural of majesty. For such an inquiry, it seems best to set aside the references to *elohim*, *Adonai*, and the divine name, since their total count would blur the finer details of the study. If we offer four categories of literature—speech, narration, law, and poetry—then the results are as follows:

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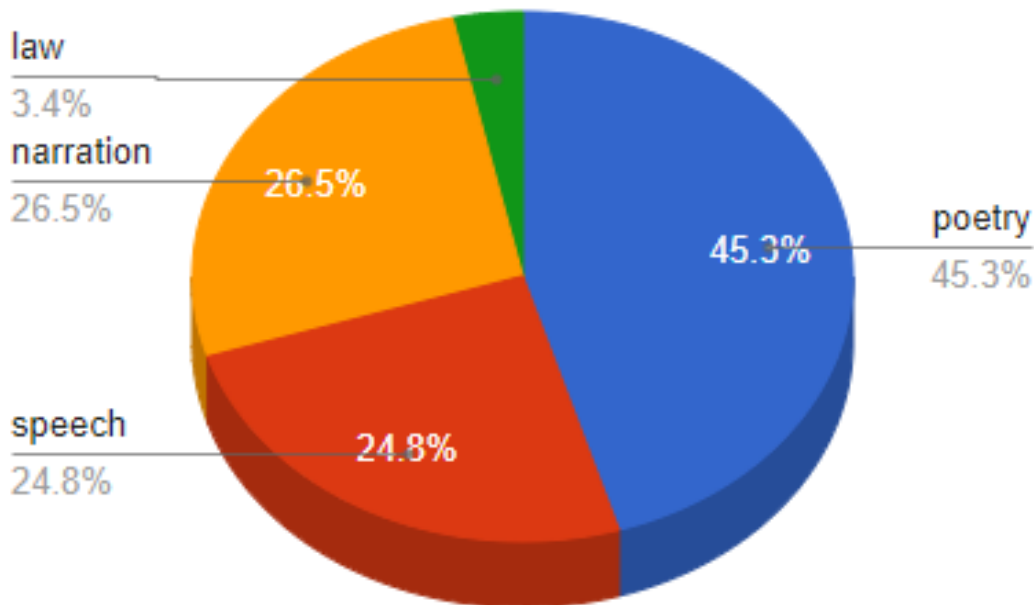
[123] Pace Thomas A. Keiser, "The Divine Plural: A Literary-Contextual Argument for Plurality in the Godhead," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34.2 (2009): 133, who suggests that there are no certain cases where the plural of majesty occurs among Hebrew verbs.

The amount of evidence we compiled under the poetry category is indicative of the flowing flexibility of the plural of majesty.[124] The poetry data also offers a word of caution to those who would insist upon a woodenly rigid numerical counting of the plural forms in order to force the conclusion that Israel's God is a plurality of persons.

Since the biblical authors primarily employed the concept of the plural of majesty to refer to the God of Israel, it is essential to reflect on the implications of this grammatical feature for unitary monotheism. First, the existence of plural forms to refer to Yahweh is not evidence of a plurality of persons within the one God, supposedly hinted at all along by the biblical authors.[125] As the concept suggests, Israel's God is *majestically* plural, *intensive* in scope, and *honorific* in value. In other words, the use of plural forms to portray the person of Yahweh reflects his heightened status, his incomparable value, and his unrivaled worth.

Secondly, the biblical authors felt comfortable depicting high-ranking human beings with recognizable plural of majesty terms also used for Yahweh (i.e., *elohim, adonim*). This attribution results in human beings bearing authorized titles and functioning as qualified agents of the one true God without threatening unitary monotheism.

Lastly, this study stands on the shoulders of some of the best Hebrew Bible scholarship available in the modern era. Notably, these scholars are not finding evidence for a numerical plurality within the God of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, these specialists observe the repeated appearance of the plural of majesty to refer to the one true God. Such a study strongly suggests a more favorable opinion is due to Hebrew Bible scholars who define Jewish monotheism, particularly the monotheism that Jesus inherited and passed along to his disciples.[126]

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[124] Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar,* 399, observed back in the year 1813 the extensive evidence of the plural of majesty in works of biblical poetry.

[125] The extent to which the plural of majesty exists within the Hebrew Bible should allow the concept to be considered in conversations about Gen 1:26 and the interpretation that describes his image as "our image"—which fits awkwardly with the angelic interpretation.

[126] See e.g., Adela Collins, *Mark: A Commentary,* Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 573-7.