

Psalm 82 declares that in the end there is no contest between the will of God and the will to power – God wins. Ultimately, God’s justice will prevail against every form of injustice and oppression – human and demonic. But in the meantime “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Psalm 82 offers a big picture vision of the just judgment of God that is characteristic of the Asaph tradition.

The ambiguity over the identity of the “gods” may be viewed positively. Instead of having to choose between either the wicked officials of Israel and other nations or demonic evil rulers and angels, the psalmist lumps them all together. The continuum of evil makes sense with respect to the psalm and the political reality that confronts the world. The human and demonic will to power is set over and against the will of God. The weak and the fatherless, the poor and the oppressed, suffer injustice and oppression, even as the wicked are favored and empowered. In our analysis of the complexity of evil it does little good to isolate either the human or demonic elements. Evil forms an inclusive whole that is anti-God and anti-Christ.

*The Great Assembly*

*God presides in the great assembly;  
he renders judgment among the “gods”;*

*“How long will you defend the unjust  
and show partiality to the wicked?  
Defend the weak and the fatherless;  
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.  
Rescue the weak and needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.  
The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing.  
They walk about in darkness;  
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.*

Psalm 82:1-5

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) mocked the notion that there was a God presiding over the great assembly. He despised salvation and judgment and claimed hope in anything other than the will to power was an illusion. Nietzsche drove skepticism and cynicism to its fatal and nihilistic conclusion. He had the courage of his convictions, even if those convictions drove him mad. He argued that humanity was falsely educated to believe in something other than the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche contended, “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”<sup>2</sup> Belief in God was an illusion created to

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 56, 258.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 23, 221.

avoid a deep down unteachable, unyielding spiritual fate that “life itself is the will to power.”<sup>3</sup> “The cardinal instinct of an organic being,” Nietzsche argued, was self-preservation. All talk of motive, purpose, freedom, and morality is meaningless. If men were true to their animal instincts they would reverence superior rank and the hardness of heart born of unfavorable circumstances. “Egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul.”<sup>4</sup> And “the noble soul [only] has reverence for itself.”<sup>5</sup> For Nietzsche there were only two kinds of people, the exalted and the exploited, the proud and the humble, the powerful and the petty, the hardened and “the doglike people who allow themselves to be maltreated.”<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche humility was unbecoming the noble soul. To exploit and dominate was a worthy goal for the man of superior rank and self-made self-worth. Nietzsche wanted a megaphone to shout from the housetops, “There is no God. There is no Incarnate One.” There is only the human being who “will have to be an incarnate will to power.” The person who “will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant.”<sup>7</sup>

Even if Nietzsche had shouted in the psalmist’s ear, the psalmist would not have flinched. The fool can say in his heart or cry from the roof top that there is no God, but that does not change the fact. The psalmist declares, “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the ‘gods.’” It is God who questions the “gods,” and not the other way around. God is not in question. Man is. Thus it is against all reason and compassion, that the will to power seeks to overrule the will of God. The gods violate the moral order and do the unthinkable. They defend the unjust, favor the wicked, and oppress the poor. These gods are narcissistic. They lay claim to heaven and earth and strut around like masters of the universe. Earlier in the psalms, Asaph described them this way: “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression” (Ps 73:4-8).

The moral order is inscribed on the human conscience and written in the heart (Rom 2:15). God’s requirements are as simple as they are beautiful: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). What could be more obvious: “Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:4)? But the “gods” rebel and usurp God’s moral authority. They exchange the will of God for the will to power. They undermine justice and deprive the people of their freedom. God renders his verdict against Israel’s corrupt judges and their demonic allies. All forms of authority that attack the justice and righteousness of God, whether human or demonic, are condemned. “The ‘gods’ know nothing,” declares the Lord. “They understand nothing.” They are walking around in the dark and the foundations of the earth are shaking.

### *The Death Sentence*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., sec. 13, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., sec. 265, 405.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., sec.287, 418.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., sec. 260, 395.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., sec. 259, 393.

*“I said, ‘You are ‘gods’;  
you are all sons of the Most High.’  
But you will die like mere mortals;  
you will fall like every other ruler.”*

Psalm 82:6-7

The living God is not intimidated by the human and demonic forces of evil. In the great assembly God “renders judgment” and sentences “all the sons of the Most High” to death. No matter how powerful and famous the “gods” may become they fall like mere mortals. The apostle John’s description of “the great supper of God” (Rev 19:11-21) is commentary on Psalm 2: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. “Let us break their chains,” they say, “and throw off their fetters.” The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps 2:1-6).

Jesus’ quote from Psalm 82 sheds light on its original meaning and on its meaning for us today. When Jesus claimed, “I and the Father are one,” his opponents picked up rocks to stone him. “I have shown you many good works from the Father,” Jesus said. “For which of these do you stone me?” His angry opponents replied, “We are not stoning you for any good work, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” Jesus’ line of defense was provocative. He essentially made a case for the divine endowment of all humanity. “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are ‘gods’”? (Ps 82:6). His statement echoes Psalm 8. When humanity is compared to the cosmos man is minuscule and insignificant, but paradoxically when we are compared to God our significance grows.

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?  
You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4-5).

Peter Craigie writes, “Many of the earliest versions took the Hebrew word for ‘God’ or ‘gods’ to mean ‘angels’. . . The translation ‘angels’ may have been prompted by modesty, for it may have seemed rather extravagant to claim that mankind was only a little less than God. Nevertheless, the translation ‘God’ is almost certainly correct, and the words probably contain an allusion to the image of God in mankind within the created order.”<sup>8</sup> Elmer Martens writes, “If one were to imagine a scale of 1 to 10 with living creatures such as beasts as 1 and God as 10, then, so high is the writer’s estimation of humanity, he should have put him at 8 or 9. It is God, and not animals, who is man’s closest relative.”<sup>9</sup> Human significance is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. We are designated and endowed by God with privileges and responsibilities that we have not earned or merited. We are crowned with splendor and honor. We are not animals subject to the law of the jungle. We are God’s image-bearers mandated to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms*, 108,

<sup>9</sup> Elmer Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIPAL Press, 1998), 202-3.

of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen.1:26). God blessed humanity and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen.1:28).

Jesus takes this revealed truth and argues from the lesser to the greater. If God spoke of people as “gods” then Jesus reasons it is not wrong for him to say, “I am God’s Son.” Surely, the way Jesus used Psalm 82 to link the reference to the “gods” to himself must have struck the religious leaders as provocative. Dale Bruner sums it up well:

“Jesus is asking: If powerful persons are called ‘gods’ in the Psalm because of the Word of God coming to them, then what should we call the person most especially sent from God to them? Indeed, what should we call the Messiah when he comes? Doesn’t this absolutely unique emissary of God deserve the title ‘God’s Son’ as much as any earthly potentate? And doesn’t Scripture often call the Messiah “God’s Son”? (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. “If Scripture calls addressed mortals gods, please tell me an appropriate title for God’s addressing Messiah, his ambassador to the planet?”<sup>10</sup>

It is ironic that Jesus used Psalm 82, a psalm that singles out corrupt rulers who deserved to be judged, to defend his messianic identity. The “gods” are under indictment and destined to die like the mere mortals they are, but in Jesus, his sent one, God intervenes to reverse the course of judgment and provide for redemption. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). But the irony goes deeper. The bad religious leaders are in cahoots with Rome. They have compromised and colluded with the devil to stay in power. And Jesus condemns them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires” (John 8:44). Their only hope for redemption is in “the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world” (John 10:36). The verdict is clear: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18).

*Rise Up*

*Rise up, O God, judge the earth,  
for all the nations are your inheritance.*  
Psalm 82:8

The psalmist has the final word. He calls for God to rise up and set things right. The nations belong to God, not the devil (Luke 4:6), and the psalmist believes that “only when the Lord comes to judge will there be a kingdom where justice and righteousness prevail.”<sup>11</sup> But there is an amazing intervention. God determined that before he would rise up to judge, he would

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<sup>10</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 646-647.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 725.

descend to deliver. C. S. Lewis describes the grand miracle of the Incarnate One this way: “In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity . . . But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.”<sup>12</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 115.