

“Bad Judges” (*mali iudices*) in the Church: Psalm 82 and Its Early Christian Reception in Jerome

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Abstract: Psalm 82 plays a major role in the debate about monotheism because it declares *prima vista* nothing less than the death of the other gods. After clarifying its historical-critical tradition within the Old Testament, I analyze the early Christian reception of Psalm 82 in Jerome’s *Homilies on the Psalms* and, finally, compare both ways of interpreting it. By understanding the אלהים (vv. 1b, 6a) as earthly judges, rather than as members of a heavenly court as normally assumed by modern interpreters, Jerome’s interpretation of Psalm 82 offers us not only a model that is very different from the standard reading of this text among most exegetes today, but also one which provides a point of critique within the church.

Key Terms: early Christian reception, *elohim*, Hebrew text, Jerome, Psalm 82

ACCORDING TO ERICH ZENGER, Psalm 82 is one of the “most spectacular texts of the Old Testament.”¹ Unfortunately, I cannot provide either an

* This article emerged from a paper I delivered at the 2020 Society of Biblical Literature Midwest Region Meeting at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana. It is based on a broader study which was published as *Sterbliche Götter—göttliche Menschen. Psalm 82 und seine frühchristlichen Deutungen*, SBS 240 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2019), esp. 33–69 and 235–49. The submission of my article coincides with the utterly shocking death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I therefore dedicate my article to all people who were victims of any kind of racially motivated violence in the past, and to those who are needlessly still facing any form of discrimination. May we all not only internalize, but practice what Father Theodore Hesburgh, the former president of the University of Notre Dame, said in the 1986 commencement address at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln: “Be the kind of person who not only understands the injustices of this life, but is also willing to do something about them.”

exegesis of Psalm 82 in its entirety, or discuss the differences between the Hebrew and the Greek text of the psalm.² As such, I will focus here only on the main outlines of the Hebrew, and especially on vv. 1, 6, and 8. Let us now first look at the Hebrew text itself (and the NRSV translation):

BHS	NRSV
מזמור לאסף	1 <i>A Psalm of Asaph</i>
אלהים נצב בעדת־אל	God has taken his place in the divine council;
בקר־ב אלהים ישפט:	in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.
עד־מתי תשפטו־עול	2 “How long will you judge unjustly
ופני רשעים תשאו־סלה:	and show partiality to the wicked? <i>Selah</i>
שפטו־דל ויתום	3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
עני ורש הצדיקו:	maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
פלטו־דל ואביון	4 Rescue the weak and the needy;
מיד רשעים הצילו	deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
לא ידעו ולא יבינו	5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
בחשכה יתהלכו	they walk around in darkness;
ימוטו כל־מוסדי ארץ	all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
אני־אמרתי אלהים אתם	6 I say, “You are gods,
ובני עליון כלכם	children of the Most High, all of you;
אכן כאדם תמותון	7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
וכאחד השרים תפלו	and fall like any prince.”
קומה אלהים שפטה הארץ	8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
כי־אתה תנחל בכל־הגוים:	for all the nations belong to you!

Obviously, here we are facing the scenario of a heavenly divine judgement. There has been a long debate among exegetes about who actually is part

1 Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 3rd ed., HThKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 482 (my translation). I only learned later through Professor emeritus Bernd Janowski that Zenger’s statement reflects Janowski’s own words.

2 For interpretations of the entire psalm, see Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), 214–17; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 479–92; and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 328–42. On textual issues in the MT and LXX, see Ariane Cordes, *Die Asafpsalmen in der Septuaginta. Der griechische Psalter als Übersetzung und theologisches Zeugnis*, HBS 41 (Freiburg: Herder, 2004).

of this assembly and who is presiding over it. First, אֱלֹהִים in v. 1b is grammatically a substantive plural (*status absolutus*), and it can either stand for the god יהוה or for gods in general. I prefer a singular in this case, not only because of the overall content of the psalm, but because this figure appears to be contrasted with the plural אֱלֹהִים in vv. 1c and 6a. So, it is probably the God יהוה who is taking his place here. Second, the issue of who is taking part in the assembly mainly emerges from the expression עֲדַת־אֵל in v. 1b, which is the only occurrence of the term in the entire Hebrew Bible. The key question is now whether אֵל is designating here a *nomen proprium* or a *nomen appellativum*. To say it otherwise: Does the psalm speak about an assembly under the rulership of the God אֵל (which is not characterized in further detail), or is it envisioning just any kind of a divine council, as the NRSV translates it?

Usually, a divine council in the Hebrew Bible is referred to by the term סוּד (as in Job 15:8; Jer 23:18, 22), but never in connection with אֵל (which is why we do not read it here as a word for יהוה). Thus, the use of the expression עֲדַת־אֵל is very unusual, and scholars have argued that it is probably a “frozen formula ... borrowed from Canaanite literature.”³ Regarding the question of whether אֵל stands here for a name or a title, one has to keep in mind that when the Hebrew Bible refers to a divine council by using the expression mentioned above (סוּד + X), this is mostly to be understood as a *genitivus subiectivus*, which means that the assembly is ruled by God (יהוה). Subsequently, עֲדַת־אֵל should then talk about an assembly under the leadership of אֵל as well.⁴ As we shall see, however, it is not that easy!

Texts from Ugarit as well as Akkadian sources show that we are probably supposed to read a plural here (so עֲדַת־אֱלֹהִים) because in these texts the word for “council” is usually followed by a plural, indicating the members of this council (and not the owner).⁵ Also, the LXX reads a plural here, and that would basically mean a third option for understanding this verse. For the purposes of this article, I will simply argue that עֲדַת־אֵל has to be taken here as *lectio difficilior* and thus should not to be replaced by a plural. However, what remains unclear in my point of view is whether אֵל indicates a *nomen proprium* or *appellativum*, and I think the author of this text wants to intentionally play with that kind of tension. Although it would be highly interesting to compare these results in a next step with the

3 E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, HSM 24 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 230.

4 See, e.g., Herbert Niehr, *Der höchste Gott. Alttestamentlicher JHWH-Glaube im Kontext syrisch-kanaanäischer Religion des 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr.*, BZAW 190 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 81.

5 See James Stokes Ackerman, “An Exegetical Study of Psalm 82” (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1966), 280.

use of the expression בְּנֵי עֲלִיוֹן in v. 6a, I would instead like to draw a few conclusions and then move on to Jerome’s exegesis of Psalm 82.

In general, it has been argued by scholarship that Psalm 82 is not only using different mythological backgrounds (a hierarchical assembly of gods of which one appears to be the leader of it, the assignment of different territories to the gods by a highest god, the transition of one god to the top of the pantheon of gods), but is also adapting them in order to point out something new (in this case the supremacy of the god יהוה).⁶ Thus, Psalm 82 does not necessarily have to be a preexilic text because the use of polytheistic motifs (possibly borrowed to some extent from Canaanite literature according to Theodore Mullen) can also be on purpose in order to point out the superiority and capacity of יהוה to set justice on earth against the other gods which totally fail.⁷

On a philological level, this monotheistic tendency, as I call it, can be seen in the absolute use of the word אֱלֹהִים in v. 8a. The fact that Psalm 82 is adapting (and not just overtaking) and thereby also overcoming mythological backgrounds becomes clear by v. 8: there is only one judge יהוה to whom belong all nations, and somehow implicitly the divine qualities of אֱלֹהִים and עֲלִיוֹן are absorbed by יהוה.⁸ These *nomina propria* of those distinct deities somehow become then the *nomina appellativa* of יהוה. However, it is due to the unique style of this text that it does not make any identifications between אֱלֹהִים, עֲלִיוֹן, אֱלֹהִים, and יהוה explicitly. Apparently, it operates with these “vacancies” on purpose to show that there was once a time when those different divine categories were still effective but which is now coming to an end because the other gods are about to die. Therefore, the purpose of this heavenly scenario is not to show יהוה overtaking the positions of those other gods, but rather to focus on their death in order to settle a radical annulment of the older mythological divine “system.” It is thus appropriate in my point of view to call this psalm a text with a clear tendency towards *monotheism* (and not just *henotheism*), despite its polytheistic traces which remain in contrast (but not in contradiction) to this.⁹ This reading of Psalm 82 under the history of religions category (*religionsgeschichtlich*) is the one which modern historical-critical exegesis mostly favors. However, there are also some (modern) voices that do not agree with this way of interpretation and try, for example, to understand

6 For the former see, e.g., Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 481; for the latter Hans-Winfried Jüngling, *Der Tod der Götter. Eine Untersuchung zu Psalm 82*, SBS 38 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969), 105.

7 See Jüngling, *Tod der Götter*, 44.

8 See Werner Schliske, *Gottessöhne und Gottessohn im Alten Testament. Phasen der Entmythisierung im Alten Testament*, BWANT 97 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973), 34, 45.

9 Adrian Schenker (“Le monothéisme israélite. Un dieu qui transcende le monde et les dieux,” *Bib* 78 [1997]: 436–48, here 445) calls these kind of texts in the Old Testament “amphibolic” (my translation).

the אלהים as (Canaanite) judges.¹⁰ These exegetes have a church father on their side, at least in some sense, although they might not even be aware of it.

ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: JEROME'S *HOMILIES ON THE PSALMS*

Jerome's exegetical works include only two which focus on the Book of Psalms: the *Commentarioli in Psalmos* (probably written between 389 and 392 CE)¹¹ and the *Tractatus in Librum Psalmorum* (written probably around 400 CE, but at least before 413 CE because Augustine cites this work in his *Letter to Fortunatianus*).¹² While the latter include seventy-four longer homilies on the Psalms,¹³ the former are of a very different character because, first, they consist of short notes which focus on scientific-philological aspects,¹⁴ and, second, they do not intend to offer a continuous commentary on the Book of Psalms as his homilies do. These probably emerged from the homilies he gave in his monastic community during the liturgy, as Jerome himself tells us in some of them.¹⁵ We also know that he was the head of a men's cloister close to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem until he died in 420 CE and that he regularly gave homilies there.¹⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that the homilies seem more "colloquial"¹⁷ and that, given the context of a homily, they also show some lack of stylistic perfection (e.g., repetitions, inaccurate quotations from

10 See, e.g., Heinz-Josef Fabry, "Ihr alle seid Söhne des Allerhöchsten' (Ps 82,6): Kanaanäische Richter vor dem Gericht Gottes," *BibLeb* 15 (1974): 135–47.

11 See Giovanni Coppa, ed., *Gerolamo: 74 Omelie sul libro dei salmi*, *Lecture Cristiane del Primo Millennio* 15 (Milan: Edizioni Paoline 1993), 18.

12 See Marie Liguori Ewald, ed., *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1, *Homilies 1–59 on the Psalms*, FC 48 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), xxv.

13 Jerome's homilies have been published by Germain Morin between 1897 and 1903 in two series (identified as "I" and "II"); however, a homily on Psalm 82 (81 LXX) is only included in the first series (identified in this article as de Ps I 81 LXX tr. [tr. = *tractatus*]). In the following I use the Latin text from Morin, ed., *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera*, Part 2, *Opera Homiletica*, 2nd ed., CCSL 78 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), 82–90; and the English translation from Ewald, *Homilies*, 102–10 (see n. 12; the homily on Psalm 82 is identified in her translation as no. 14). For a longer discussion of Origen's potential authorship of this work, which cannot be explored here, see Vittorio Peri, *Omelie origeniane sui salmi: Contributo all'identificazione del testo latino*, StT 289 (Vatican City: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1980), 114–73; and Coppa, *Omelie*, 13–32.

14 See Coppa, *Omelie*, 18.

15 See de Ps I 132:1, 3 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 276, 281–82), and de Ps I 119 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 246–61). For further references see also Ewald, *Homilies*, xxvi–xxvii.

16 For the chronological details, see Alfons Fürst, *Hieronymus. Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 145–47.

17 Ewald, *Homilies*, xxvi–xxviii.

Scripture). Thus, the *Tractatus* are different from Jerome's other writings regarding those aspects.¹⁸

A comparison of ancient and modern approaches to interpretation of Psalm 82 can be fruitful, and Jerome is an ideal exemplar of the former because he shows knowledge of the Hebrew language (besides Greek and Latin) and allows us much insight into his interpretation of the psalm's text at the very beginning of the fifth century CE.¹⁹ Jerome is familiar with Origen's theory that Scripture can be understood in at least two ways: literally (indicating the historical meaning) and allegorically (revealing the spiritual meaning).²⁰ While the former might still be able to give a sense of the beauty of a text (which is why Jerome compares this level of reading Scripture with "silver"), only the latter is able to show its beauty in its full entirety (which is the reason why Jerome refers to this as the level of "gold").²¹ In general, it can be said that although Jerome shows a preference for an allegorical (and in particular christological) interpretation of the texts of the Old Testament in his exegetical works, he still remains indebted to a historical understanding of the texts as well, and he probably got to know this exegesis of the so-called School of Antioch, first through the scholarship of Apollinaris of Laodicea.²² In the following paragraphs I will not deal with Jerome's *Commentarioli* separately for mainly two reasons: first, they chiefly consist of very short notes on the Psalms as already mentioned above, and second, Jerome's *Commentarioli* on Psalm 82 do not differ significantly from what he says in his *Tractatus* on the very same text.

Let us take now a closer look at the text itself. Unlike other early Christian authors such as Eusebius and Theodoret, Jerome does not begin his homily on Psalm 82 with an introductory note referring to the preceding

18 See Coppa, *Omēlie*, 16.

19 See Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 78–79; Eva Schulz-Flügel, "The Latin Old Testament Tradition," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, Vol. 1, *From the Beginning to the Middle Ages*, Part 1, *Antiquity*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 642–62, here 655.

20 The first is usually referred to by expressions like *iuxta/secundum historiam/litteram*, the latter by words like *per tropologiam, iuxta/secundum allegoriam, iuxta anagogen, per metaforam, iuxta prophetiam, spiritaliter*. See Siegfried Risse, ed., *Hieronymus: Anmerkungen zum Psalter*, *Fontes Christiani* 79 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 40–45. In our case of Psalm 82 the following phrases indicate that Jerome is referring to the spiritual meaning of the text: *ceterum est et alia interpretatio sacratiores . . . dixi exemplum, ut de carnali venire possimus ad spirituale . . .* (de Ps I 81:3–4 LXX tr. [CCSL 78, 85]); *hoc interim diximus primum secundum litteram . . . dicamus autem et aliter* (de Ps I 81:5 LXX tr. [CCSL 78, 88]); *dicamus et aliter* (de Ps I 81:8 LXX tr. [CCSL 78, 88]).

21 See in Ps 67:14 LXX comm. [= *commentarius*]; Latin text in Germain Morin, ed., *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera*, Part 1, *Opera Exegetica*, CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), 214.

22 See Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 128.

psalm; instead he jumps right into it by talking about God's different positions:

"God arises in the divine assembly." There are many different postures that one adopts. Frequently we are sitting down; sometimes we are standing; other times we are walking. In the same way, God is described in terms of human individual differences, and His attitude is represented in a variety of ways. If we are saints, then, we are like Moses, and God says to us: "You wait here near me," for that is what He said to Moses. Now Moses at that time was standing on a rock; hence, for him, God also was standing. If, however, from saints we have afterwards become sinners, for us God no longer is standing, but is walking about; He who before had been standing for us moves from His place. As soon as we change, God changes at the same time with us. I may even say, as long as Adam was in Paradise and observed the law, God for him was standing. After Adam sinned, however, he heard the voice of God who was now walking about in the Garden of Eden. Would you like proof that as far as Adam was concerned God was walking? What did God say to him? "Adam, where are you?" He who had not avoided God while He was standing, fled from Him walking.²³

According to Jerome, the fact that God is standing in the assembly tells us something about humans as well as about their relationships to each other. The different positions correspond with different qualities of their relationships, and it is noteworthy that the different positions are always described from a human's perspective. So, when God is standing, this shows us human's holiness, whereas when he is walking like in the Garden of Eden it teaches us the sinful dimension of humans. After finishing that aspect Jerome moves on to the next posture:

We have talked about standing; we have talked about walking; let us talk about sitting. Whenever God is represented as seated, the portraiture takes one of two forms; either He appears as the ruler or as the

23 Ewald, *Homilies*, 102. De Ps I 81:1 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 82–83): "*Deus stetit in synagoga deorum.*" *Multa sunt schemata. Frequenter enim sedemus, interdum stamus, interdum iacemus, interdum currimus, interdum ambulamus. Ita et Deus describitur pro varietate hominum, et status ipsius diversus inducitur. Si sancti sumus, et sumus similes Moysi, dicitur ad nos: "Tu vero hic sta mecum."* *Hoc enim dicit Deus ad Moysen. Stabat enim Moyses super petram: propterea et Dominus stabat illi. Si vero sancti prius fuerimus, et postea peccatores, iam non nobis stat Deus, sed ambulat: hoc est, movetur de loco suo, qui nobis ante steterat. Postquam nos moti fuerimus, et ipse nobiscum pariter commovetur. Denique et Adam quamdiu in paradiso fuit, et legem servabat, stabat ei Deus. Postquam vero transgressus est, audivit vocem Dei ambulantis in paradiso. Vis scire quia ambulabat ei Deus? Quid ei dixit? "Adam, ubi es?" Qui ante stantem Deum non fugerat, postea ambulantem fugit.*

judge. If He is like a king, one sees Him as Isaiah does: "I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne." There He is presented as the sovereign king. When He is portrayed as judge: "Thrones were set up, and the books were opened." This description comes from the Book of Daniel. What does it mean? "Thrones were set up, and the books were opened": The Lord shall be seated upon a throne as judge and He shall rehearse everyone's deeds. The books that up to that time had been closed will then be opened. We shall give an account of everything we do, every word we utter, every thought, even the most idle word; everything is recorded in God's books. Some think that there are actually books in heaven in which our sins are inscribed. I think these books are our consciences which will be revealed on that day, and each one will see for himself just what he has done. "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed." So, thrones were placed, and the books were opened. How much is written in my book, I dare not confess even to my brother, nor to my friend! The angels know what I have done; the thrones know; the seraphim know; the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit knows.²⁴

According to Jerome, the posture of sitting appears to be not a very distinctive sign because it can be understood in two possible ways (*dupliciter*). For him, Isaiah 6 is envisioning a heavenly king (*rex*) who governs over the earth. However, what seems to be more important for him is his interpretation of God as a judge (*iudex*) according to Daniel 7. Within this eschatological context, God (apparently, the Latin *dominus* is still referring to God-Father) has taken the position of the judge and all humans have to account for their words, thoughts, and deeds. Therefore, for him the *libri* mentioned in Daniel 7 represent the consciences of every human being whose "content" becomes known to anybody now. Subsequently, Jerome answers the question about the meaning of God's sleep with reference to the temptations that all humans, despite the fact that they are supposed

24 Ewald, *Homilies*, 102–3. De Ps I 81:1 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 83): *Diximus de stante, diximus de ambulante: dicamus de sedente. Quandocumque sedens inducitur Deus, dupliciter inducitur: aut quasi rex, aut quasi iudex. Si quasi rex, videt eum sicut Esaias: "Vidi Dominum sedentem super thronum excelsum et elevatum." Ibi quasi rex regnans inducitur. Quando vero quasi iudex inducitur: "Throni positi sunt, et libri aperti sunt." In Danihele scriptum est: Quid dicitur? Throni positi sunt, et libri aperti sunt: hoc est, Dominus quasi iudex sediturus, et omnium opera relecturus. Libri qui modo complicati sunt, tunc aperientur. Omne quod facimus, quod loquimur, quod cogitamus, etiam de otioso verbo reddituri sumus rationem: scriptum est in libris Dei. Putat aliquis libros esse in coelo, ubi scribuntur peccata nostra. Ego puto libros esse conscientias nostras, quae tunc aperientur, et videbit unusquisque quod fecit. "Nihil occultum, quod non revelabitur." Propterea throni positi sunt, et libri aperti sunt. Quanta scripta sunt in libro meo, et ne fratri quidem meo neque amico meo audeo confiteri. Sciunt angeli quid fecerim, sciunt throni, sciunt seraphim: scit Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus.*

to be saints, encounter for the purpose of being tested.²⁵ Finally, Jerome provides us with a short summary of what he thinks is the most fascinating point about the assembly envisioned in Ps 82:1:

We have discussed four of God's postures; for some He stands; for some He walks; for some He sits; for some He seems to sleep, but for others He awakes and arises. "God arises in the divine assembly." Because they were gods, for them God was standing. In all our assemblies, God takes different positions: He is standing for some; for others He is seated; for some He is walking; for others He is sleeping. Although God is in Himself immutable, He adapts Himself to our human individuality. Just appreciate the dignity of man! "God arises in the divine assembly." He bestows a title of that kind upon us that He may also bestow its merit. "He judges in the midst of the gods." As a commander in the midst of His army He judges gods. "He judges gods"—a fearful thought, full of terror. If He judges gods, what does He do about the sinner?²⁶

By mentioning the *ipsa synagoga nostra*, Jerome is probably referring to their own liturgical assembly in the monastery.²⁷ It is important to notice that Jerome is now talking about an assembly of humans in which God is standing. It becomes clear from the context that these humans are also called "gods."²⁸ However, the scenario ends with a fearful vision of God's judgment on humankind, by which Jerome probably tries to address his present audience. Let us now turn to Ps 82:2, in which we encounter Jerome's understanding of the gods (אלהים) as judges:

The psalmist uttered the last two verses as a prophet. In the next short verse, however, God Himself is speaking to the judges, that is, to the rulers of the people: "How long will you judge unjustly?" The following versicles are addressed especially to judges. If they are secular judges, the sense is obvious; but if they are judges of the Church, we must understand them to be bishops and priests. "How long will you judge

25 See de Ps I 81:1 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 84).

26 Ewald, *Homilies*, 104. De Ps I 81:1 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 84): *Diximus de quattuor schematicis Dei, quia aliis stat, aliis ambulat, aliis sedet, aliis quasi dormit, aliis vero evigilat et consurgit. "Deus stetit in synagoga deorum." Quia dii erant, propterea stabat eis Deus. In qua ipsa synagoga nostra diversa Deus habet schemata: aliis stat, aliis sedet, aliis ambulat, aliis dormit. Cum ipse sit immutabilis, pro nostra varietate mutatur. Vide hominis dignitatem. "Deus stetit in synagoga deorum." Largitur nobis nomen, ut largiatur et meritum. "In medio autem deos diiudicat." Quasi imperator in medio exercitus diiudicat deos. "Deos diiudicat." Res formidabilis, res terroris plena. Si deos diiudicat, de peccatore quid facit?*

27 For a reason I do not understand, Ewald's English translation uses a plural at this point.

28 Probably, this is meant by the Latin *nomen* which is given to them, and which the English translates with "title."

unjustly?” He who perverts justice is the judge of injustice; he is that unjust judge of whom the Gospel says he neither feared God nor respected man. “How long will you judge unjustly?” I gave you power over My flock and over the people of God; you must be judges, not wolves.²⁹

Of which people’s *principes* (which correspond to the אֱלֹהִים in Hebrew) is Jerome speaking? Although he does not mention it explicitly, it is somehow clear from the context that Jerome is talking about Christians and, thus, about their leaders!³⁰ Furthermore, Jerome introduces here the difference between secular and ecclesiastical judges and explicitly identifies the latter with priests and bishops.³¹ And finally, he mentions the possibility of evil judges in the church: *Debetis iudices esse, non lupi!* Apparently, he must have had some good reason for raising this harsh critique already in his commentary on v. 2 because we are not yet talking about v. 5, to which we now turn:

Let us now, however, look into a different meaning. “All the foundations of the world are shaken.” I shall overthrow wicked judges that have laid their foundations on earth and not in heaven; they who should have for their foundation Christ, upon whom the architect Paul built, rejected Him and laid their foundations upon earth.³²

Again, Jerome mentions here the possibility of evil judges (*mali iudices*). However, he now provides us also a reason for their wicked judgment by introducing an allegorical-christological meaning of this verse: instead of focusing on Christ, the judges started focusing on earthly things (which are not mentioned here in more detail) and have therefore become evil. What still remains unclear is the identity of the “I” talking here and who is supposed to stop the judges’ bad behavior. Probably it is God who is

29 Ewald, *Homilies*, 104. De Ps I 81:2 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 84): *Duos istos versiculos quasi propheta dixit. Hoc vero quod sequitur, “Usquequo iudicatis iniquitatem?” ipse Deus loquitur ad iudices, hoc est, ad principes populi. Specialiter isti versiculi, qui secuntur, ad iudices dicuntur. Si saeculi iudices, manifestum est: si vero ecclesiae iudices, de episcopis intellegamus atque presbyteris. “Usquequo iudicatis iniquitatem?” Qui iudicat iniquitatem, iudex iniquitatis est. Ille est iudex iniquitatis, de quo dicitur in evangelio, quia Deum non timebat, et hominem non verebatur. “Usquequo iudicatis iniquitatem?” Dedi vobis potestatem in gregem meum, et in populum Dei: debetis iudices esse, non lupi.*

30 In contrast to Eusebius’s and Theodoret’s (Greek) commentaries on Psalm 82, it is noteworthy that Jerome is not necessarily thinking of the *populus* as Jewish anymore.

31 The difference between those two types of judges is probably attested here for the very first time among early Christian authors within their interpretations of Psalm 82.

32 Ewald, *Homilies*, 106. De Ps I 81:5 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 85): *Dicamus autem et aliter. “Movebuntur omnia fundamenta terrae.” Ego malos iudices, qui fundamenta posuerunt in terram, et non in caelo, subvertam: qui debuerunt fundamentum habere Christum, quem posuit architectus Paulus, noluerunt, sed in terra posuerunt fundamenta sua.*

delivering this adhortative phrase (*subvertam*), but this only becomes clear by taking a look at Ps 82:8:

Up to this point, God has been speaking to man; once more the prophet speaks. “Rise, O God; judge the earth.” Rise, for our boat is being tossed about by the waves. “Rise, O God; judge the earth”; for evil judges are not rendering judgment, but perverting Your law and slaughtering Your flocks. Rise, O You, who are the true Judge. Because the wicked judges are dead like Adam, and have fallen like one of the princes, You, rise; You, judge; You, save Your creature.³³

Jerome notices correctly that the psalm’s last verse does not address humans anymore but rather it is God who is being addressed by the prophet’s speech.³⁴ While it is clear that God is addressed, one might, however, wonder about the meaning of “once more” (*rursum*). Why is it that *rursum propheta loquitur* when apparently he is talking here for the first time? A solution might be that for Jerome, God is speaking vv. 1–7 of this psalm through the prophet to us, and now this very prophet is addressing his words in v. 8 to God. Because all evil judges have died, it is now up to God to save his creature. Possibly, *creatura* is here an allusion to the story of paradise. Jerome’s description of God’s final judgement clearly shows that he interprets Psalm 82 predominantly in an eschatological way. The fact that the earthly judges are so incapable and corrupt urges God to appear as the *verus iudex*, although it might be uncertain whether the text envisions God or Jesus as the judge:

Let us express this otherwise. Arise, You who have suffered for us and have died for us; arise and save us. Let us say this in still another way. You who have come in humility and lowliness, come as a judge and set us free. “Rise, O God; judge the earth.” . . . Notice the clemency of the prophet. He did not say, destroy earth; but judge, judge and save. He did not say, judge through Your angels, judge through Your ministers, for if they judged, they could not be merciful; they are the executors of Your judgment. But if You judge, You Yourself can be merciful. “Rise,

33 Ewald, *Homilies*, 108. De Ps I 81:8 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 87–88): *Hucusque Deus locutus est ad homines, et rursum propheta loquitur. “Surge, Deus, iudica terram.” Surge, quia navis nostra fluctibus tunditur. “Surge, Deus, iudica terram”: quoniam mali iudices non iudicant, sed evertunt legem tuam, et pecora tua lacerant. Tu surge, qui verus iudex es. Quia ergo mali iudices mortui sunt sicut Adam, et ceciderunt sicut unus de principibus: propterea tu surge, tu iudica, tu salva creaturam tuam.*

34 For Jerome, as for many others, the prophet David is usually considered to be the author of most of the psalms. However, this does not have to be the case here because in Ps 8:1 LXX comm. (CCSL 72, 190) Jerome admits that psalms have been authored by different persons (like David, Asaph, and Sons of Korah). Thus, it is possible that he might also think of Asaph here.

O God; judge the earth.” The emperor is able to change his sentence; the governor, on the other hand, cannot. That is why we are imploring You to be Judge, not in a spirit of defiance, but with entreaty. Men and angels are cruel, indeed, when compared to You; You alone are the most kind Judge.³⁵

Whether it is God or Jesus in this case, what is more important here to highlight is the sharp opposition between this divine judge to come and the human judges (divine *clementia* and *eleemosyna* vs. human *crudelitas*). And finally, what is even more surprising is that even the angels fall under this last category regarding their judgment.

PSALM 82 AND ITS EARLY CHRISTIAN RECEPTION IN JEROME

Jerome understands the *synagoga deorum* as an assembly of judges. However, it is noteworthy that he does not consider these *principes populi* to be members of the Jewish people but to be priests and bishops of the church, and very probably he is trying to make a point of critique within the church by doing so. Jerome allegorically takes God’s standing (*stare*) as a starting point to talk about different “relationships” between God and humans. Furthermore, he puts their capacity of being saints (being “gods” or “children of the Most High”) in contrast to Adam’s mortality from Genesis. The ongoing corruption of the judges—together with their unlawful decisions—requires in Jerome’s understanding God’s final eschatological judgement: dying like mortals and falling like any prince, the judges will be removed from their office, and God will take their place instead as the *verus iudex clemens* in order to save all creatures.

It is clear from this examination of Jerome’s allegorical reading of Psalm 82 that he offers us a model that is very different from the modern history of religions interpretation. In general, it can be said that monotheism as a topic does not play any role in Jerome’s exegesis of the psalm. However, as I mentioned before, a few modern exegetes are indeed in favor of under-

35 Ewald, *Homilies*, 108–9. De Ps I 81:8 LXX tr. (CCSL 78, 88): *Dicamus et aliter: Surge, qui pro nobis passus es, pro nobis mortuus es: surge, et salva nos. Dicamus aliter. Qui venisti humilis et contemptus, veni quasi iudex, et vindica nos. “Surge, Deus, iudica terram.” . . . Videte clementiam prophetarum. Non dixit, Interfice terram: sed iudica, iudica et salva. Non dixit, Iudica per angelos, iudica per ministros tuos. Illi enim si iudicaverint, non possunt misereri, quia executores sunt sententiae tuae. Tu vero si iudicaveris, potes ipse misereri. “Surge, Deus, iudica terram.” Imperator potest suam mutare sententiam, praefectus non potest. Propterea te iudicem deprecamur, non contemntes, sed precantes. Homines enim et angeli ad comparationem tui crudeles sunt: tu solus mitissimus iudex es.*

standing the אלהים as (Canaanite) judges. For them, Psalm 82 expresses some kind of social criticism of that time when those judges were in office. Thus, if we understand the aspect of acting as a bad judge as a *tertium comparationis*, then Jerome is delivering here a pointed critique of the church.³⁶

³⁶ It was only after this article was accepted for publication that I became aware of the work of Walter Moberly and Charles Schulz on Psalm 82. Although I was not able to deal with them in more depth here, I would still like to mention and recommend them for reading. See R. Walter L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 93–123; Moberly, “Justice and the Recognition of the True God: A Reading of Psalm 82, *RB* 127 (2020): 215–36; and Charles R. Schulz, “‘I Said, You Are Gods’: Pastoral Motives Manifest in Patristic Citations of Ps 82:6” (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO, 2020).