Hebrew plural: Used with an intensive meaning as well?

👤 Josh_ · 🕐 Nov 8, 2010

Josh_
Senior Member

the phrontistery
U.S., English

Nov 8, 2010   ⤴ #1

As I said here, I believe the biblical Hebrew plural is used in two ways -- (1) quantitatively to indicate number, as we would expect, and (2) as an intense, or extense, form of the singular. Perhaps we could think about it as having a quantitative function and a qualitative function. The plural can indicate quantity, or it can indicate quality on a plural-like level, as it were, that is, a more intensive or extensive level than the simple singular contains. Read through the argument and let me know what you think.

First off, some preliminary matters:

I wanted to transliterate the Hebrew so that those who do not read Hebrew script could get an idea of what I am talking about. I must apologize in advance for this transliteration which I imagine is inaccurate. My main area of study has been modern Hebrew, not classical/biblical Hebrew. If someone would like to offer up a better transliteration, please do so.

I wanted to mention what led me to look into this. There were three main things:

1. I was on a religion discussion forum once and came across a thread in which some members were claiming that the fact that אלהים (*eloheem*) was a plural word (gods) indicates that the ancient Israelites were polytheists (post biblical era). They also claimed that שמים (*shamayim*, sky/heaven), also a plural noun, indicated belief in more than one heaven or different levels of heaven.

2. When I saw that I recalled a discussion in a Hebrew class in which my teacher said that the word הרים(*hareem*), singular הר(*har*), could refer to mountains or one big mountain. I can't remember what exactly led to that discussion, but I do remember her saying that. So I decided to look into the issue of why אלהים was a plural. I thought perhaps when referring to the one, singular "God," of which the Israelites came to believe in, אלהים was being used in an intensive fashion, and not a plural.

3. Along with this, I got to thinking about Hebrew's sister language, Arabic, which has intensive forms created in similar ways. For example, Arabic has what is called "the plural of the plural." As the name indicates a plural form is added to an already pluralized word in order to indicate a greater number of something. For example the word for house is بيت (*bayt*). The plural of that is بيوت (*buyuut*, houses). An additional plural form, ات (*aat*), can be added to that to create بيوتات (buyuutaat), which is a more intensive plural than بيوت. Also, some forms can have singular or plural meanings. Some words of the form فعّالة (*fa33aala*), which is itself an intensive form, can have singular or plural meaning. The word رحّالة (*raHHaala*) can mean "a great traveler," or it can be the plural of رحّال (*raHHaal,* traveler), meaning "great travelers." And so I thought, if this exists in Arabic, why wouldn't or couldn't Hebrew have something similar, considering they share other similar structures?

Also, before I get started I think I need to talk a little about the Hebrew plural, for those who are unfamiliar with the subject. Hebrew has two plurals: (1) a masculine plural --ים (*eem*), as in בתים (*bateem*) houses, plural of בית (*bayeet*) house; and (2) a feminine plural – ות (*ot/oth*), as in דירות (deerot) apartments, plural of דירה (deerah) apartment. In Hebrew, two nouns can be linked together to create a possessive structure. The first term is the thing possessed and the second in the possessor. For example, בית האיש (*bayeet ha-eesh*) means "the house of the man" or "the man's house." Now, when a word has the masculine plural ending on it, the ם (*meem*) drops off when it occurs as the first term of the possessive structure. So, for "the man's houses," instead of בתים האיש (*bateem ha-eesh*) it is בתי האיש (*batay ha-eesh*), "the man's houses." This is also the case when a pronoun suffix occurs

as the second element of the possessive structure. This explains why we find אֱלֹהֶיךָ (*elohaykha*) your god(s), and not אֱלֹהֵימָךּ (*eloheemkha*) and "שְׁמֵי" (*shamayay ha-shamayeem*) and not "שָׁמַיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם" (*shamayeem ha-shamayeem*) for "the heavens of heavens."

The Argument

The main evidence for this idea revolves around the syntax of words surrounding אלהים (*eloheem*) in the Hebrew Bible. As I've noted, eloheem is a syntactically plural word, the singular form being אלוה (*eloha*), which is ultimately derived from אל (*el*). But despite this, when the word refers to the one "God of Israel," it usually takes singular agreement – that is, the verbs of which it is the subject are conjugated in the singular form, and pronouns and adjectives, where they appear with the word, are also in singular forms. There are exceptions, of course.

It should be noted that this word appears over 2500 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in addition to referring to the God of Israel" it also is used as the ordinary plural referring to the multiple gods of polytheism (as in Exodus 20:3) in which case it takes the standard plural agreement.

We find that this syntactically plural word has a singular meaning very early on in the Bible. In Genesis 1:1:

"בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ."
(*ba-rasheeth bara eloheem eth ha-shamayim u-eth ha-aretz*)
"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/genesis/1-1.htm)

The verb בָּרָא (*bara*) is in the third person (he) singular past conjugation of the verb.
The word אֱלֹהִים appears several more times in Genesis 1 and in all cases the verbs are conjugated to the third person singular, eg. יֹאמֶר (*yo'mer*, he said), יַרְא (*yara*, he saw), יִקְרָא (*yeekra*, he called), etc..

It is worthy to note, however, that in Genesis 1:26 the first person plural pronoun is used, but the third person singular conjugation of the verb is still used. The Hebrew grammarian Heinrich Genesius (and other early Hebrew grammarians) called this the *pluralis excellentiae* (plural of excellence), which is similar to the so-called "royal we."

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Post too long. Continued below...

<div align="right">Last edited: Nov 8, 2010</div>

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Nov 8, 2010   #2

...Continued from above.

Genesius defines this as "the pluralis excellentiae or majestatis, as has been remarked above, is properly a variety of the abstract plural, since it sums up the several characteristics belonging to the idea, besides possessing the secondary sense of an intensification of the original idea. It is thus closely related to the plurals of amplification...which are mostly found in poetry."

Now, examples of pronouns used with the word:

(1) First person singular (I):

From Exodus 20:2 and Psalms 81:10 this phrase:

„אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ...‟

(*anokhi yahwah elohaykha…*)

"*I am the lord, your god…*" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/exodus/20-2.htm and http://bible.cc/psalms/81-10.htm)

In the above verses the first person singular pronoun אנוכי(*anokhi*, I) is used, and not the first person plural אנחנו(*anakhnu*, we), thus indicating that אֱלֹהִים is singular.

(2) Second person singular (you):

2 Samuel 7:27:

„כִּי-אַתָּה יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...‟

(*ki athah yahwah tzba'oth elohay isra'el...*)

"*For you, O lord of hosts, the God of Israel…*" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/2_samuel/7-27.htm)

Here we see the singular אַתָּה (*athah*, you).

And again in Samuel 7:28:

„וְעַתָּה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה, אַתָּה-הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים...‟

(*u-othah adonay yahwah, athah hu ha-eloheem…*)

"*And now, O lord God, you are God…*" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/2_samuel/7-28.htm)

Here we have two singular pronouns – אַתָּה (you), and הוּא (hu, literally he, but here functioning as a copula – are).

It is also worthy to note that אֲדֹנָי (*adonay*; non-possessive form – אֲדֹנִים *adoneem*) is a plural form, but with singular meaning.

(3) Third person singular (he):

1 Kings 18:39

„...יְהוָה הוּאהָאֱלֹהִים, יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים‟

(*yahwah hu elohiim, yahwah hu eloheem*)

"*…The lord, he is God, the lord, he is God.*" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/1_kings/18-39.htm)

Examples of adjective use:

In Psalms 7:10 we find:

„אֱלֹהִים צַדִּיק...‟

(*…eloheem tsadeeq*)

A just/righteous god.

צַדִּיק is a singular adjective used to qualify אֱלֹהִים.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that אֱלֹהִים also occurs with plural adjectives, but while still retaining singular meaning. For example in Joshua 24:19 we find "אֱלֹהִים קְדֹשִׁים" (eloheem qedosheem, a holy god) in which קְדֹשִׁים is a pluralized adjective qualifying אֱלֹהִים. However, immediately after we find the phrase "הוּא אֵל-קַנּוֹא הוּא לֹא-יִשָּׂא…" (hu el kanoa, hu lo yeesh'a...) – meaning "he (singular) is a jealous (singular adjective) god, and he (singular) will not forgive (third person singular conjugation of verb)..." – indicating that the intended meaning in singular. Note also that the singular word אֵל (el) was used for God.

There are other instances of plural words being used with singular meanings, such as the behemoth found in Job 40:15:

"הֶנֵּה-נָא בְהֵמוֹת, אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּךְ; חָצִיר, כַּבָּקָר יֹאכֵל."
(heena-na behemoth, asher oseethee eemak; khatzir, ka-baka yokel)
"Look at the behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox." (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/job/40-15.htm)
Here, בְהֵמוֹת (behemoth) is plural, the singular being בהמה (behemah), yet we have singular qualifiers, such as יֹאכֵל (yokel), singular "he/it eats." In the rest of the description of the behemoth (Job 40:16-19), masculine third person singular pronouns, pronominal suffixes and verb conjugations are used (not listed to save space). The description is of a great beast with great strength – so great in fact, that not just the term behema would be sufficient, but the more intensive term behemoth, which adds more meaning, is applied.

In sum, אֱלֹהִים (eloheem), when referring to the one God of Israel has a singular meaning, despite its being a technically plural word. The above bible verses I cite, in which I show verb, pronoun, and adjective use, are consistent with this singular status of the word. This shows another use of the plural. Considering Arabic has established intensive forms, in which adding prefixes, infixes, or suffixes, adds meaning to words it is not a stretch to think that Hebrew, being a related meaning, may be similar in this respect. So, in addition to being using quantitatively, it seems apparent that the plural form can have a qualitative function in terms of intensity – the term in the plural has a quality that is more intense that the simple singular.

Post too long. Continued below...

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Nov 8, 2010   #3

...Continued from above.

This may help to explain other apparent plurals, such as שמים (shamayeem, sky/heaven), פנים (paneem, face), חיים (khaeem, life), מים (mayeem, water) etc.

First, let's look at שמים (shameem, sky/heaven). This technically plural word is sometimes used to claim that there

was belief in more than one heaven, or different levels of heaven, among the Israelites. However, the word never appears in a singular form at all (as far as I'm aware) in the Bible, so I do not think that the usage of the syntactic plural necessarily indicates more than one heaven.

In particular the following verses, which contain the phrase "הַשָּׁמַיִם וּשְׁמֵיהַשָּׁמַיִם" (*ha-shamayeem u-shamayay ha-shamayeem*), literally translated as "the heavens and heavens of heavens," are sometimes used to claim belief in more than one heaven:

1 Kings 8:27

כִּי, הַאֻמְנָם, יֵשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים, עַל-הָאָרֶץ; הִנֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם וּשְׁמֵיהַשָּׁמַיִם, לֹא יְכַלְכְּלוּךָ--אַף, כִּי-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בָּנִיתִי.

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens and [even] the heavens of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/1_kings/8-27.htm)

2 Chronicles 2:6

וּמִי יַעֲצָר-כֹּחַ לִבְנוֹת-לוֹ בַיִת, כִּי הַשָּׁמַיִם וּשְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִםלֹא יְכַלְכְּלֻהוּ; וּמִי אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר אֶבְנֶה-לּוֹ בַיִת, כִּי אִם-לְהַקְטִירלְפָנָיו.

"But who is able to build a temple for him, seeing the heavens and [even]the heaven of heavens cannot contain him? Who then am I to build a temple for him, except as a place to burn sacrifices before him?" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/2_chronicles/2-6.htm)

2 Chron 6:18

כִּי, הַאֻמְנָם, יֵשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עַל-הָאָרֶץ: הִנֵּה שָׁמַיִםוּשְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, לֹא יְכַלְכְּלוּךָ--אַף, כִּי-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁרבָּנִיתִי.

"But will God really dwell on earth with humans? The heavens, and [even] the heavens of heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (Variously translated here -- http://bible.cc/2_chronicles/6-18.htm)

But, as I said, the word for sky, or heaven, in biblical Hebrew is never used in the singular, so I do not think that the usage of the syntactic plural is necessarily indicating more than one heaven. I believe the plural is used as an intense form here, or more rather an extense form, indicating the sheer size, the vastness, the extense of the sky/heaven, which is omnipresent when you look above.

The structure sounds very much to me that it being used figuratively to emphasize the idea that God is so big, so great, that not even the vastness of heaven can contain him. This being the case, how could he possibly dwell on the earth?

This structure is very reminiscent of the common English structure of repeating a word for emphasis:

"He has millions and millions of dollars."

For the next words – פנים (*paneem*, face), חיים (*khaeem*, life), מים (*mayeem*, water) – the connections are a little harder to make, but I will offer some of my conjecture.

For פנים (*paneem*, face), the logic may be here is that the face is the most prominent part of the body. As Yuval9 said, it may be that פנים is the plural of פן (pan), which, according to the dictionaries I consulted means anything from component, aspect, or feature. Now, an object or person, it could be argued, is made up of many different features or has many different aspects. The face is generally the first thing – the first of these aspects/features – one would notice, so it is the most prominent part of a thing or person, thus it is described with the intensive form. Who knows.

With חיים (*khaeem*, life) and מים (*mayeem*, water), I think the logic is similar to that of שמים (*shameem*, sky/heaven). When one looks out on the ocean or other large body of water it becomes apparent that there is a lot of it; a vast or

expansive area is covered by water and so the plural of intensity is used to refer to. Likewise, life is also a large thing figuratively speaking; it is all encompassing and ubiquitous, thus it needs a big word (meaningwise) to refer to it, so again, the plural of intensity is used.

Last edited: Nov 8, 2010

Aoyama
Senior Member

川崎市、巴里 (黎)
français Clodoaldien

Dec 2, 2010   ⤳   #4

That is a long and interesting post.
I will just make a wee little comment :

> שמים (*shameem*, sky/heaven).

the reading is *shama'im* not *shamim* (or *shameem*, but better avoid ee for i) as you refer to later on, in your development "הַשָּׁמַיִם" (*ha-shamayim* - a under shin*).
Shama'im could be interpreted as a "dual".

Last edited: Dec 2, 2010

Josh_
Senior Member

the phrontistery
U.S., English

Dec 6, 2010   ⤳   #5

Thank you for your comment, Aoyama.
Yeah, I am always ambivalent on which transliteration to use. I had originally used 'i', but then changed all the 'i's to ee's. But I guess I forgot a few.

Aoyama
Senior Member

川崎市、巴里 (黎)
français Clodoaldien

Dec 7, 2010   ⤳   #6

Not very important but if *ee* is very often used *in Arabic* to render **i** , I will say it is practically *never used* in Hebrew (in official transliteration).

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abbymac
New Member

English-American

Thank you Josh, for your post. It was extremely informative.

My question has to do with 1 Sam 28:13 (Saul and the witch of Endor). I see from the concordance the the word in this verse is "elohim" yet different English versions offer different translations: god, gods, ghostly figure, and spirit are the ones I came across.

I get that it must not be an easy thing to translate. But can't at least plurality be determined by the surrounding grammar?

It seems from what you are saying that in order for this to be a singular anything it must be an intensive one. In context it doesn't seem to be intensive (compared to the One True Living God). Any thoughts?

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carratelli
New Member

English - American

Can anyone shed light on why the personified Wisdom is plural חַכְמוֹת in Proverbs 1:20, but the verb form is singular? I'm not a Hebrew scholar, so I'm unfamiliar with Hebrew grammar. In other places, the personified Wisdom is singular. Could it be plural for emphasis here? (Exceeding Wisdom, for example.) Many thanks.

Drink
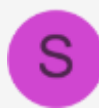Senior Member

New England
English - New England, Russian - Moscow

(Note that you got the first vowel wrong, it's חָכְמוֹת.)

The verse, as most verses, has two parts:
- חָכְמוֹת בַּחוּץ תָּרֹנָּה = the wisdoms will sing outside (plural verb)
- בָּרְחֹבוֹת תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ = in the streets she/it will give her/its voice (singular verb)

This leads me to believe the subject of the second part might be different, but I have no idea what it would be. The further verses continue with the singular subject.

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shalom00
Senior Member

Israel
English - US

One of the commentators explains that the subject of the second part of the verse is each individual wisdom.
Most of the commentators do not relate to this change. The transition between plural and singular is not uncommon in Biblical poetry or lyrical text.

David S
Senior Member

Richmond, VA, USA
English - US

Dec 28, 2017   ⟨   #11

Today I learned that בעלים can be used as a singular noun to mean "owner" as opposed to בעל which means husband. Is this only in Modern Hebrew, and does this have anything to do with the thread topic? If not, please split it off.

Drink
Senior Member

New England
English - New England, Russian - Moscow

Dec 28, 2017   ⟨   #12

It's used in the Bible that way (as in Exodus 22:13-14), and likewise in later texts.

tessareea
New Member

English

Jul 8, 2018   ⟨   #13

My Hebrew teacher is actually a Jew converted to Mormonism (a religion which believes that the godhead is three separate personages). When he attended Hebrew Rabbinic school, he learned that when plural nouns are used with singular verbs, it usually denotes an entire group lumped together. As mentioned above, all behemoth eat grass, so they're treated as a singular object.

Following the same vein of thinking, the Hebrews (at least at one point) believed in a polytheistic pantheon with the marked difference of monotheistic attributes and actions. Basically, if all gods behave the exact same way, they can't really be considered as separate beings.

There are a few accounts of "elohim" being used with plural verbiage, in Genesis 20:13, when Abraham's God caused him to wander, and in 1 Sam 28:13, when the Witch of Endor saw God ascending from the earth.

It's also very interesting, once you consider the various Bene Elohim in scripture, such as in Genesis, Job, Psalms, and various deuterocanonical and apocryphal books wherein the sons of the gods act as a council... and the root of "beginning" in both Hebrew and Greek imply a council of rulers. (As well as the various "drifts" from a single creator to the Greco-Roman, Hindi, and Native American traditions of polytheism.)

Drink
Senior Member

New England
English - New England, Russian - Moscow

Jul 9, 2018   ⤳   #14

Then why does בעלים take plural verbs?

tessareea
New Member

English

Jul 9, 2018   ⤳   #15

You're making the assumption that elohim doesn't. However, it routinely takes plural verbs when referring to other, non-Israelite pantheons (ie, the Egyptian and Canaanite God's). Those are, of course, pantheons wherein the gods are not unified and routinely "war" with one another. We can't ignore linguistic presidence simply in favor of dogma; the idea of plurality of Majesty does just that.

Drink
Senior Member

New England
English - New England, Russian - Moscow

Jul 9, 2018   ⤳   #16

Whereas בעלים, which refers to one owner, who is presumably not in conflict with himself, takes a plural as well. It doesn't sound like your theory holds up.

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