

Deuteronomy 32:8

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“When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel” (as in the NKJV). In recent decades versions have appeared replacing the last word, ‘Israel’, with ‘God’, either in the text itself or in a footnote, or both. To understand what is going on, we must look at the evidence:

‘sons/children of Israel’—Masoretic Hebrew Text, Samaritan Pentateuch, all ancient versions except the Septuagint (LXX)

‘angels of God’—LXX

‘sons/children of God/gods’—Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS); so alleged by the footnotes mentioned above

Of course the LXX has been around for a long time, but few had the courage to follow it in Deuteronomy 32:8 until the advent of the DSS, so to them I now turn.

Those who have given any attention to the DSS know that for Deuteronomy there are only fragments, most being mere scraps with a few letters on them. Of these, two have been alleged to contain bits of 32:8—4QDeut-j and 4QpaleoDeut-r. 4QpaleoDeut-r stands for a group of scraps (a. 20), one of which is said to contain bits of 32:6-8. Upon inspection, the end of verse 8 is not there, so this scrap is irrelevant to the question in hand.

4QDeut-j is a fragment containing a few letters spread over three lines: the first line has parts of three letters; the second line has five or six letters; the third line has nine letters, being *bene elohim*, ‘sons of gods’. So far as I have been able to confirm, this is the sole basis for the claim that the DSS have ‘sons/children of God’ in Deuteronomy 32:8. (If anyone knows of something that I have missed, please send it to me.) But wait just a minute please, on what basis can anyone responsibly claim that 4QDeut-j is an honest copy of the biblical book, Deuteronomy? The Essenes had their own ideas about such things, and were not averse to writing in defense of their ideas. The scrap is scarcely sufficient for a clear, demonstrable identification. Indeed, the editors themselves say that it is from an “excerpted” document. Not only that, the scrap definitely does **not** have the biblical *bene ha-Elohim* found in Genesis 6:2 and 4, and Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7. **I deny that the DSS furnish any valid evidence against the reading of the Masoretic Text in this place.**

Now I wish to say a few words about the LXX here. The LXX that we know and use is based on three Alexandrian manuscripts from centuries after Christ: Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. With reference to the New Testament, the contribution of those three MSS has been mainly negative, and especially so on significant doctrinal questions. What possible basis could anyone have for imagining that the editors responsible for the NT in those MSS would not do similar damage to the Old Testament? If they did not like or understand ‘sons of Israel’, they were perfectly capable of changing it to ‘angels of God’. None of which should encourage us to follow them.

Having said all of the above, we should not be unduly critical of those who have difficulty understanding this verse. How can the inheritance of the nations depend on the number of Israelites [or on the number of angels, for that matter]? I don't know; but God does! Consider the following texts:

1 Peter 1:19-20: "but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a faultless and pure lamb; who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake." God's Lamb, with blood shed, was so known before the creation of our race and planet. You can't have blood without a body, so the incarnation and the whole Plan of redemption was in place before the Creation.

Ephesians 1:4: "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him, in love." This one is difficult for our poor little finite minds to handle. I, Wilbur Pickering, was chosen before the world was made, so God knows who I am, and all about me. Our Good Shepherd calls us by name (John 10:3). If God knew all about me before Creation, then obviously He knew all about the "sons of Israel" also, so Deuteronomy 32:8 should present no difficulty to our understanding.

2 Timothy 1:9: "the One who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began." Repeat the comment above. Note that 'time' had a beginning.

Titus 1:2: "in hope of eternal life—which life God, who cannot lie, promised before the ages of time." Repeat the comment above.

Acts 15:18: "All His works are known to God from eternity." Although perhaps 5% of the Greek manuscripts omit this verse (as in most modern versions), the 95%, including the best line of transmission, are certainly correct. Of what relevance is 'time' to an eternal Being? It may be that 'time' and 'space' are concepts that are limited to our planet and our solar system. (Without time and space, how can you calculate speed, or distance?) God knew all about the "nations" and the "sons of Israel" before Creation.

Matthew 25:34: "Then the King will say to those on His right: 'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you at the foundation of the world.'" More of the same.

Hebrews 4:3: "His works were certainly finished from the foundation of the world." More texts could be added to this list, but I have given enough to make the point: our notions of 'time' do not place any limit upon the eternal God. The Text is perfectly clear; God knows what is going to happen long before it actually does. Our tiny, limited, finite minds have trouble understanding this, but that does not alter the fact. It should be equally obvious that we are totally incompetent to 'improve' upon a divinely inspired Text.

Vast segments of Christianity, beginning in early centuries, have been anti-Semitic, at least theologically. They consider that the Church replaced Israel as God's people, and so on. I wonder if that anti-Semitism might have something to do with the haste with which some have jumped on the 'sons of God' band-wagon. But whatever one's personal predilections, surely questions of the Text should be resolved on the basis of objective evidence.