

A Contextual Analysis of Psalm 82 from an African Perspective

Rev. Dr. Milly Maturu Erema, Ph.D.

Uganda Christian University

Psalm 82 has recently been of interest to scholars because of Michael Heiser's popular writing on divine council imagery. He proposes that the biblical text reflects Ancient Near Eastern ideas about God presiding over angelic beings who mediate his rule over the nations.

I come from the Lugbara people in northern Uganda, who still live as tribal people ruled by tribal leaders/rulers/judges. My ancestors migrated among the people of the ancient kingdom of Kush. For many centuries, they lived in the present Ethiopian highlands and in parts of Egypt. Later due to search for pasture for their cattle, they travelled South along the Nile valley towards to source of the Nile until they settled in northwestern Uganda. By that time my people were still part of the kingdom of Kush, which the British called the "Lado Enclave." This piece of land was transferred to the British to become part of Uganda in 1914, in the Anglo-Belgian Commission agreement.

Until only a few decades ago, after the arrival of the European missionaries, my people lived according to religious beliefs and cultural practices much like those of the Ancient Near East. My people were some of the very last groups to be Christianized, and elders in my village still followed traditional practices in my lifetime. Our ancient ideas resemble those of many groups in East Africa, which contrast markedly with the secular Western perspective that is prevalent among academics today.

In this presentation, I will share observations about Psalm 82 from my Lugbara cultural perspective (and knowledge from other African traditional religions) to answer the questions below. I will also discuss parallels in the biblical text.

1. Who are the “gods” in Psalm 82 in Lugbara context?
2. What is the difference for the Lugbara people between God’s judgment and the judgment of the gods in Psalm 82?
3. How might invoking of curses among the Lugbara illuminate the plead for God to arise and executed judgement in Psalm 82:8?

Who are the “gods” in Psalm 82:1 and 6 in a Lugbara context?

Verse 1 a: “Elohim stands in the assembly of El,”

The Lugbari people believe that the supreme God is the Creator and judge of all, but that various intermediary beings exist that accomplish his will on earth, both divine and human. Some of these beings are heavenly beings while others live here on earth. Because these beings share God’s divinity, they are sometimes called “gods” as well.

All these beings will ultimately be judged by the supreme God and we do imagine God calling them to stand before him in judgement in a kind of divine counsel. Westerners may find it helpful to understand Lugbara thinking about who would appear before God, and how it sheds light on the imagery of the benei-Elohim in Psalm 82.

The “gods” would include:

1. Angels – Maleika. The Lugbara believe that angels live in heaven with the supreme God. They are God’s servants. Their main work is to pay homage to God. But God also uses them as messengers to pass His information to individuals on earth.
2. The spirits of the departed. These are in hierarchy lower than the angels. In most cases God uses these ancestor spirits to warn the Lugbari communities they were once part of, in case of sin in the community, or even an impending calamity. The spirit of the dead can also be used by the supreme God to bring calamity on the community as punishment, if they don’t heed warnings given to them. But the spirit of the departed can also bring God’s word of solace by encouraging the people in times of sickness, death, disasters, wars, epidemics, drought and floods, etc.
3. Spiritual beings - Among these are also the bad spiritual beings. These roam around the earth to afflict people with diseases which find no cure. They enter human beings to cause mental illness. They bring undeserved calamity to people. They report to the supreme God what they see on earth.
4. The tribal leaders/rulers/judges. These are the lowest in rank in the divine council. They are mortal beings who God put in them his spirit to be his representatives to govern the affairs of the Lugbara people. Each of them has a piece of God in them, that is, His spirit. For that reason, they are gods to the Lugbari people. They mediate the supreme God’s rule over the Lugbari people, in the different Lugbari communities. They execute their governance entirely using God’s authority.

Related to this fact is also a case for the “father.” He is “god” in his family. As “god” his wife addresses him “lord.” The father heads his family with God’s authority. And this authority is infused in him by God’s spirit. Therefore, the gods all stand subject to God’s judgment when power corrupts them and fail to judge justly. God would convene his divine council to execute judgement upon his unfaithful arbitrators.

So, the Lugbara believe that, when the supreme God sees need, He convenes a divine council where these multiple divine beings (gods) meet together with the supreme God in charge, for each of them to give their accounts to God.

So, for a Lugbara, in verse 1a, when God arises in the assembly of EL, this would mean God stands amidst His own divine council, because, there is no God above the supreme God. He is the Creator, the judge, and all the affairs of His creation are in His hands. It’s only the supreme God who calls the divine assembly and all the “gods” assemble before Him. This assembly includes the heavenly divinities, and also those on earth. Then God stands in the midst of them, which include the Lugbara community leaders/rulers to execute judgement.

Some scholars would argue that in most parts of Old Testament and also in the Ancient Near Eastern World, the inferior deities are indicated to stand around or in front of the supreme deity who is seated on his throne, which is true. However, in my Lugbari community, when tribal leaders gather together to judge a case, they all sit down. It is the accused who stand up before the judges in the tribal tribunal. However, when all the deliberations are completed, the chief judge then **stands up** to give the final verdict. This view may be the most difficult for some western Christians to grasp, it seems to be the view that best interprets Psalm 82 in my cultural

context. And one that exalts the lordship of the sovereign God and Creator over the human rulers more than the other views.

2. What is the difference between God's judgment and the judgment of the gods in Psalm 82 for the Lugbara people?

The Lugbara believe God is the eternal, righteous, ruler and judge of the Earth. He is the defender of the cause of the poor, weak and helpless.

But the judgment of the gods can only be trusted when they exercise their God given authority in their roles and in the fear of God. However, in verse 2-4, the gods are confronted over their corruption, partiality and injustice. God confronts the gods of their lack of justice in the judgments they made and their partiality to the wicked. It is obvious they either have taken bribes and perverted justice. It's nothing but corruption. Instead of defending the course of the poor and fatherless, and vindicating the wicked and oppressed the weak destitute.

The Lugbara always believe when leaders/rulers/judges become corrupt and judge unjustly, God will intervene to judge them. Therefore, in verse 1, "God takes His stand in His own council and judges in the midst of the rulers because they have continued to make unjust legal decisions." (v.2-4). These "leaders/rulers/judges" are literally called "gods" because they were endowed with God's authority to rule God's people. As gods, they were to operate according to God's set standards, but they didn't. These Leaders/rulers/judges have acted as though they are free to do what they will. But the Lugbara who believes in God who is righteous judge, will remind them

that they are not free to do as they will. For they also have the Most High Judge whom they will answer to if they do not know nor do they understand.

In verse 6, “I said, “You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.” For a Lugbara, this is to say, “God put these leaders in place of authority” God gave them the right to rule and to judge. God exalted them above the Lugbari people and gave them the sword that they might punish the wicked and deliver the righteous. But these leader/rulers/judges have judged unjustly. They have shown partiality to the wicked. “Nevertheless, they will die like men and fall like any one of the princes.”(V.7) For a Lugbara, death is the great equalizer. And many corrupt leader/rulers/judges died bad. That is to say, the rulers won’t always be in their position forever.

The Lugbari people believe every leader will stand before God in judgement. God is the eternal leader. God judges with justice. And He does not mince words about what every ruler should do. Just as the Psalmist reminds these corrupt rulers, because they fail to use God’s authority entrusted to them for a just cause, they will stand judgement. And because they have discouraged the righteous and emboldened the wicked they will answer to God for it. They are not the ultimate judges. They are not the final authority. The gods will not get away with their corruption. There is a higher judge.

Do corrupt rulers really understand? Can they violate the Law of God and yet still escape? They cannot! They will be judged. People submit to them because all authority comes from God. But their day will come to an end by the sovereign will of God.

3. How might invoking of curses among the Lugbara illuminate the call for God’s judgement in Psalm 82:8?

Verse 8: “Rise up O God, and execute judgement on the earth! For you own all the nations.”

Among the Lugbara, curses are invoked in situations where unjust treatment has been imposed on innocent persons/people. The innocent sufferer does not have power to abate the unjust treatment, so he or she turns to God and invokes curses upon the wicked in power. The Lugbara believe that God will judge the wicked leaders without partiality to bring justice for the sufferer by granting the curses invoked upon the unjust.

In a traditional Lugbara context, Psalm 82 would portray God’s analysis of the human condition, his delegation of power to Lugbara tribal leaders, God’s limitless authority, and his radical aims of justice for the people.

Among the Lugbari people, cursing is also used by helpless people to call upon calamity to befall their tormentors. When a helpless person is being persecuted for no cause, this victim knowing that he has no help anywhere but will turn to God. The victim will pronounce curses against the tormentors to God, so that, God can pay back his persecutors by effecting those curses. The victim knows that he is powerless to pay back for his suffering, but turns to God who is supreme in His universe and above all other gods. The victim knows that God is a just God, and will judge justly. He will not show partiality like the other gods, such as, the tribal leaders/rulers/judges.

The tribal leaders/rulers/judges were the focus of community governance. They played significant roles in ordering the tribal communities by being agents of justice, retribution and harmony. Good tribal leaders/rulers/judges were often praiseworthy among the Lugbara. However, in some instances these leaders were known for injustice and corruption, especially directed towards the needy poor and the helpless suffering. In most cases, this injustice was

perpetrated by the wealthy, who pay bribes to these leaders/rulers to judge cases in their favor. Such unfair circumstances will force the victim to cry-out to God to come down to judge the gods. The Lugbari people believe that these leaders acts' of violations of justice would alter the fate of the Lugbari people or community. These corrupt leaders/rulers "gods" seems to be the subject of this Psalm. For in verse 8, the poor, the fatherless, the oppressed, the suffering and the needy, who are violated by these leaders/rulers rise-up to cry o-out to God for divine execution of judgement.

Just as the poor oppressed and the suffering needy are helpless, in the hands of their corrupt, unjust leaders, they turn their attention to the supreme God who is mightier than these "lesser" gods. The Lugbari people believe the supreme God is just. And he defends the course of the helpless! When the cries of the helpless reach unto Him, He rescues them by judging the gods who are causing suffering to the helpless.

The invoking of curses among the Lugbara can illuminate the Psalmist call for God's judgement in verse 8 in the following way: After warning the gods in verse 6 and 7, in verse 8, the Psalmist's pleads and prays for God to "stand up" to judge the earth because of the wickedness of the gods. The Psalmist begs God to set up a righteous kingdom in which all the judges will answer to Him and all the rulers will bow to God. He pleads for that day when the corrupt rulers will answer for what they've done and God will reign in righteousness. The Psalmist looks to this day when God puts an end to all corrupt rulers and their corruption.