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## Who Are the Bad Guys?:

—Psalm 82 and the Movie *Of Gods and Men*—

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### Introduction

Several years ago, a religious movie, *Des hommes et des dieux*, known in English as *Of Gods and Men*, became a French box office hit, and won a few distinguished prizes.<sup>1</sup> The movie, directed by Xavier Beauvois and starring Lambert Wilson and Michael Lonsdale, tells the tragic story of the Trappist monks of Tibhirine in Algeria. The title, *Of Gods and Men*, which comes from the text of Ps 82 shown at the beginning of the movie, deserves our attention.

Viewers may find the title puzzling. Who are the “of gods and men” in this movie? Does it point to the monks? But, why are they considered as “of gods” (in plural)? Moreover, the monks, despite their tragic end, do not fit the character of the “gods” condemned in Ps 82. If not the monks, then to whom does the title refer? To their killers? But, the movie ends without any hints that these supposedly “bad guys” are to be condemned to death. Then, who does the title *Of Gods and Men* imply? Be that as it may, what is the significance of the title as well as the quotation of the Psalm in conveying the message of this religious movie?

This article will show that in our world wounded by religious-motivated violence, the title of the movie and the quotation of the Psalm help provoke

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<sup>1</sup> The movie won the Grand Prix at the 2010 Cannes Festival as well as Best Foreign Film Award from the *National Board of Review of Motion Pictures* in New York.

fundamental questions that can direct peoples of faith toward a deeper understanding of, on the one hand, the impartiality of God's final judgment, and, on the other hand, the complexity of the reality of life we are living.

We will clarify this point by, first, looking at how the designation "gods" in Ps 82 has been interpreted, particularly within the Jewish traditions. We then try to understand the quotation within the context of Ps 82 as a whole. Next we will turn to the movie to see who are the characters that fit the image of the "gods" portrayed in Ps 82. Finally, we will conclude that the title *Of Gods and Men* and the quotation of Ps 82 function to help the audience to reflect on the fundamental question for every people of faith, "Who is right before God?" At the same time, the title and the quotation of the psalm help the audience to be prepared to accept the paradox that being faithful to one's calling often brings suffering and death. But this suffering and death, for the one with faith, eventually leads to *life*.

## I

The movie *Of Gods and Men* begins with the citation of Ps 82:6-7a:

*"I declare: "Gods though you be,"  
offspring of the Most High all of you,  
Yet like any mortal you shall die..."* (NAB).

The biblical texts that call mortals "gods," especially the phrase which is found in Ps 82:6, have attracted the attention of commentators.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have pointed out the ways this text has been understood from various biblical

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<sup>2</sup> Philo, for example, wrestled with the text of Exodus 7:1, in which God says to Moses, "See! I have made you as God to Pharaoh." Philo's view concerning this passage can be seen in many of his works (*Leg All* 1:40, *Sac* 9, *Det* 39-40, 161-62, *Migr* 84, 169, *Mut* 19-20, 125, 128-29, *Somn* 2:189, *Quod Omn* 43-44). See Jerome H. Neyrey, "I Said You Are Gods' Psalm 82,6 and John 10" *JBL* 108 (1989) 647.

approaches. Anthony Hanson, for example, summarizes how the statement “you are gods” is interpreted within the Jewish traditions. He says that the “gods” in Ps 82:6 refers to (a) angels, (b) judges, and (c) the Israelites at Sinai.<sup>3</sup> The people of Israel at Sinai experienced a new creation and became “deathless” because in receiving the word of Torah, they resumed once again the image and likeness of God.

In the NT, a well-known allusion to Ps 82:6 is found in the Gospel of John. In John 10:34-36, Jesus seems to follow the Jewish midrashic interpretation of Ps 82. Here, Jesus alludes to the statement “you are gods” in Ps 82:6 to make his point against his opponents. When the Jews accused him of blaspheming for calling God his Father, Jesus, referring to Ps 82, argues that if “those to whom the word of God came” are called “gods,” it is all the more appropriate in his case. Jesus is the word made flesh (1:14). He *is* the Son of God.<sup>4</sup> The phrase “those to whom the word of God came” indicates Jesus’ understanding of the “gods” in Ps 82. For Jesus, “you are gods” refers to the people of Israel at Sinai. There at Sinai the word of God had been given to the Israelites through Moses (John 1:17).<sup>5</sup>

But in the Johannine context, Jesus’ allusion to the psalm has a double function. On the one hand, it is to prove his sonship. At the same time, the

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Hanson, “John’s Citation of Psalm LXXXII Reconsidered,” *NTS* 13 (1966-67) 363-67. More recently, James M. Trotter compares Ps 82 with other biblical texts as well as ancient Near Eastern texts which describe divine counsel. Trotter notices that the characters proposed for the identity of ‘gods’ in Ps 82 fall into two main categories: human judicial officials or divine beings. He then proposes that the title “gods” refers to divine kings, that is, human kings who were considered to have divine status.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus actually never says explicitly “I am the Son of God.” Yet in the Gospel of John, Jesus is speaking again and again of God as his “Father.” In doing so, Jesus had essentially made that claim. See, J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) 604.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus seems to follow the midrashic interpretation of Ps 82. Neyrey goes further to suggest that Jesus’ interpretation “might be the earliest extant example” of such midrashic interpretation. See, Neyrey, “I Said You Are Gods,” 647.

allusion functions as an irony. It shows that even God's own people the Israelites (including his Jewish opponents), to whom the word of God came, fail to receive Jesus, the word made flesh (John 1:11). And the verdict for not knowing Jesus is that "you will die in your sins" (John 8:21, 24). In any case, when Jesus alludes to Ps 82 in John 10, the reader of the Gospel of John knows to whom "you are gods" is referring, that is, the Israelites and his Jewish opponents to whom the word of God has been given.

This is not the case with the quotation of Ps 82:6-7a in the movie *Of Gods and Men*. In this movie, the statement "you are gods" at the opening scene remains puzzling throughout the movie. One who pays attention to the title of the movie and the quotation of Psalm 82 at the beginning of the movie will ask, which characters of this movie fit the image of "gods" of Ps 82 and therefore will die like mortal men? Are they the monks, who despite their godliness, die horrifically? Or, is the citation of the Psalm aimed at the kidnappers, the self-proclaimed guardians of God's word, the Quran? Or, does it refer to the government officials who seem to be in control and have power to save the monks from the Islamist extremist rebels? *Of Gods and Men* does not give the answer. Rather, it leaves the problem open and unsolved.

The audience of *Of Gods and Men* has to wrestle with this question because its implication is crucial for understanding the message of this religious movie. To ask, "Are there any characters in the movie, all mortal men, worthy to be called 'gods'?" is the same as asking, "Is there anyone who can claim himself right(ous before God)?" This is one of the fundamental questions for any believer—in the case of this movie, both Muslim and Christian. And just as it is true when one is confronted with such fundamental questions of life, so it is also true here that one has to embrace and love the question in order to, as Reiner

Maria Rilke puts it, “live some distant day into the answer.”<sup>6</sup> So, to go deeper into this question, we shall first make a brief overview of the original context and content of Ps 82. Then, we will try to put this question within the Algerian context in *Of Gods and Men*.

## II

Within the Book of Psalms, Ps 82 belongs to the collection of psalms known as the Psalm of Asaph (PA),<sup>7</sup> which includes Pss 50, 73–83. These psalms fall within the Elohistic Psalter (Ps 42–83), a collection of psalms in which the divine name Elohim is preferred over that of Yahweh. Setting aside the issue of the date of composition of Ps 82, the historical context of this psalm shows that it “is a visionary revelation of the heavenly world rooted in the ancient Near East cultic tradition.”<sup>8</sup> As Kenneth M. Craig, Jr. has pointed out, “The image of the gods gathered in a divine council as a political-judicial assembly is a common mythological motif of the religious world of the ancient Near East, . . . .”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, “you are gods” refers to deities.

Although in its context, the psalm is rooted in an ancient Near East mythological world-view, and here the One God of Israel (*El*) and the gods of the nations (*Elohim*) are gathered in a divine assembly, the central issue in Psalm

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<sup>6</sup> Rilke’s advice to a young man who sought him out: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved. . . and try to love the *questions themselves*. . . . Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. . . . *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually. . . live along some distant day into the answer.” See, Reiner Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet: Revised Edition*. Translated by M. D. Herter. New York: W. W. Norton, 1934, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Asaph is a musician who was among those whom David appointed to oversee music in worship (1 Chr 15:17), and who sang at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple (2 Chr 5:12). Pss 50, 73–83 are attributed to him.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth M. Craig, Jr. “Psalm 82” *Interpretation* 49 (1995) 281.

<sup>9</sup> Craig, “Psalm 82,” 281.

82 is not polytheism. Rather, the central issue of this psalm is justice. This appears in God's opening accusation to the gods in v. 2:

*"How long will you judge unjustly  
And favor the cause of the wicked?"*

Here God's question of "how long" has a rhetorical effect. God does not seek an answer from the gods. Instead, God lodges a complaint against them. The question thus has the full force of an imperative, as if God says, "Stop the injustice."<sup>10</sup> This call for justice is reinforced in vv. 3-4, where each verse begins with imperatives calling for justice and just judgment:

*"Defend the lowly and fatherless;  
render justice to the afflicted and needy."  
"Rescue the lowly and poor  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*

Here four groups are particularly singled out in God's plea for action: the weak, the orphaned, the afflicted, and the destitute. These are the people who lose their socio-economical rights and are marginalized politically, not because of their fault, but because of "the hands of the wicked." And after pondering a moment and reflecting on the condition of the gods (v 5), God finally pronounces the judgement on the gods in vv. 6-7, the statement which is cited at the opening scene of *Of Gods and Men*. God strips the gods of their divine status and condemns them to a human fate: death. In the ancient world-view, gods are

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<sup>10</sup> Craig, "Psalm 82," 282.

no longer gods when they fall; they will die like mortals.<sup>11</sup> Ps 82 then closes with the narrator's voice in v 8:

*“Arise, O God, judge the earth,  
for yours are all the nations.”*

The narrator ends this psalm with another imperative, now directed to God, to ask God to intervene. After all, God's judgment is not restricted to the guilty. All will be judged by the One God of Israel.

### III

Now we turn to the movie. The movie *Of Gods and Men* is set within the context of the Algerian civil war in the 1990's.<sup>12</sup> The peaceful life in the monastery of Tibhirine, where the monks live in harmony with their Muslim neighbors, is soon interrupted by the violent threats of the extremist rebels. The rebels kill the Croatian foreign workers, the first violent scene shown in this movie. Then a local elder angrily tells the monks about the killing of his cousin's granddaughter, only for not wearing *hijaf*. A few more scenes of violence are shown. The villagers are living in fear. In the monastery, the tension heightens with the visit of a group of rebels on Christmas night demanding the doctor and medical supplies. Christian, the leader of the community, refuses their demands. He cites the Quran to prove the monks' goodwill.<sup>13</sup> They were saved that night.

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<sup>11</sup> Craig, "Psalm 82," 283.

<sup>12</sup> Concerning the Algerian civil war in the 90's, see, for example, Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War: 1990-1998*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> He quotes *Surah Al-Ma'idah* 5:82, "And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, 'We are Christians.' That is because among them are priests and monks...." This passage of Quran indicates special affinity of Muslims toward Christians. See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et al. (eds), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, (New York: Harper One, 2015) 319.

But eventually, seven monks were abducted during a nighttime raid and were held hostage. An attempt to save them failed and only their heads were recovered later.

All this violence was done by over-zealous extremists who claimed to act in the name of God. The victims murdered in the movie: the Croatians, a girl, an imam, the monks, all are ordinary people. They are the vulnerable in this violent society. They are victims of a complicated political turmoil in the country, marked by resentment and bad memories of its past.

The government officials, are portrayed in the movie as those who hold the power. Yet, the seemingly corrupt government fails to protect the powerless villagers. Whenever the officials appear in the movie, they intimidate more than protect the people. In the case of the monks, the officials just want them to leave their monastery and the village, and even better to leave the country altogether as soon as possible. In the end, they fail to save the lives of the abducted monks.

If “the gods” in Ps 82 are accused of failing to render justice and to protect the powerless, both the extremists and the government officials fit well into the category. Reading Ps 82 within the Algerian context in *Of Gods and Men*, both groups, although they are enemies of each other, are together “the gods” who are condemned to death for acting unjustly and for failing to protect the powerless. But these supposedly “bad guys,” survive until the movie ends. Thus it seems that the judgment of God to the gods (that they will die like men) pronounced at the beginning of the movie is not meant for them—unless one realizes that the end of the movie is not the end of the whole story.

On the other hand, the movie beautifully portrays the Trappist hallmarks of prayer, silence, and work in powerful scenes involving each monk and their community. Many scenes show their contacts with people, all done with mutual respect and kindness, which underlines their godliness. But in between these scenes, the movie also shows the monks’ constant struggle with the decision



whether to stay or to leave. Not only their conversations and arguments concerning this topic, but also their personal agony shows that they are men who struggle with their own humanity. In the end they all decided to stay, a decision which may be seen as naïve, and even one critic accused them of committing the sin of pride.<sup>14</sup> The end of the movie shows their fate: they are killed. The supposedly “good guys,” the main characters of this movie died in a tragic end.

Is it to the monks that the verdict of Ps 82 at the beginning of the movie is addressed? Maybe. But one cannot ignore the last scene of the movie. *Of Gods and Men* ends with the scene of seven monks walking in a procession to their execution in the white snow that symbolizes the Resurrection.

#### IV

Back to the question, to whom does the statement “you are gods” at the opening scene of the movie refer? Who are the “gods” who shall die like mortal men? Who are the “of gods and men” in the title of this movie? Within the context of the complicated socio-political turmoil exacerbated by religious extremism in Algeria in particular and other parts of our world in general, this is not a question of religious triumphalism, “Whose God is the true God?” but a question of “Who is right before God?”

If there is any answer to the questions of such a nature, it cannot be univocal. Oftentimes the answer lies in a paradox. The bad often seem to thrive when the good look vulnerable and fall away. Just like in the Gospels’ story of Jesus, it is not the Jews who are to die in their sin, but Jesus who died in a tragic death on

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Ebert writes in his review of this movie, “Did they (the monks) make the right choice? In their own idealistic terms, yes. In realistic terms, I say no. They have the ability to help many who need it for years to come. It is egotism to believe their help must take place in this specific monastery.” Ebert’s review can be found in this link:

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/of-gods-and-men-2011>. Accessed June 20<sup>th</sup> 2016.

the cross. There is no easy answer to the question of who is right before God. After all, in the end all are subjected to God's judgement. This is the basic religious conviction in Ps 82 which is shared by *Of Gods and Men*. It might be the reason why Ps 82 is cited at the opening scene of this movie. Within a society marked by political turmoil and religious extremism, it leads the audience to reflect on who is right before God and how one is to be right before God. Because in the end, all have to face his throne of judgement.

Since the monks recite all 150 psalms each week in their Divine Office, they repeatedly sung Ps 82.<sup>15</sup> It is not an exaggeration therefore, to say that they must have also, as the psalmist, realized that in the end all are subject to God's judgment. The monks too are subject to God's judgment, not only their killers. Knowing that after all "*yours are all the nations,*" they finally decided to stay. Following their Master, they chose to be faithful to their calling, although the decision led to a tragic death. But it is a death faced in the faith of the Resurrection. As James Martin puts it, their "no" to the suggestion to leave the poor and the oppressed villagers becomes a "yes" to solidarity with the oppressed, "a yes to God, a yes, paradoxically, to life."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Psalm 82 appears at noon on the Monday of the Fourth Week. It is preceded by Ps 119 and followed by Ps 120.

<sup>16</sup> See the review of James Martin:  
<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Of-Gods-and-Men-A-Profound-Work-of-Art-James-Martin-03-04-2011?offset=1&max=1>. Accessed on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2016.