Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God

By Michael S. Heiser

Introduction

Moses' farewell song in Deuteronomy 32:1-43 is one of the more intriguing portions of Deuteronomy, and has received a good deal of attention among scholars, primarily for its poetic features, archaic orthography and morphology, and text-critical problems.[1] Among the textual variants present in the Song of Moses, one in Deut. 32:8 stands out as particularly fascinating. The verse is rendered as follows in the NASB:

> "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."

Controversy over the text of this verse concerns the last phrase, "according to the number of the sons of Israel," which reflects the reading of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible (hereafter, MT), בני ישׂראל. The MT reading is also reflected in several later revisions of the Septuagint (hereafter, LXX): a manuscript of Aquila (Codex X), Symmachus (also Codex X), and Theodotion.[2] Most witnesses to the LXX in verse 8, however, read ἀγγελῶν θεοῦ , which is interpretive.[3] Several also read υἱῶν θεοῦ .[4] Both of these Greek renderings presuppose a Hebrew text of either בני אלהים or

---

1 For an up-to-date overview of the scholarship on the Song of Moses, see Paul Sanders's thorough treatment of Deuteronomy 32, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). See also F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry,* Biblical Resources Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997); W. F. Albright, "Some Remarks on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy XXXII," *Vetus Testamentum* 9 (1959): 339–46; and D. A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry*, Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series 3 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1972).

2 Fridericus Field, ed., *Origenis Hexaplorum, Tomus I : Prolegomena, Genesis-Esther* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 320, footnote 12.

3 This is the predominant reading in the LXX tradition and is nearly unanimous. See John William Wevers, ed., *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum, Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum, vol. III,2: Deuteronomium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 347 (hereafter, Göttingen *LXX*); idem, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy*, Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995, 513). Wevers refers to this majority reading as "clearly a later attempt to avoid any notion of lesser deities in favor of God's messengers" (*Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy,* 513).

4 *Septuaginta*, 347 (hence the Göttingen LXX has adopted this reading as the best, dispute fewer attestations).

בני אלים. These Hebrew phrases underlying ἀγγελῶν θεοῦ and υἱῶν θεοῦ are attested in two manuscripts from Qumran,[5] and by one (conflated) manuscript of Aquila.[6]

The debate over which text is to be preferred is more than a fraternal spat among textual critics. The notion that the nations of the world were geographically partitioned and owe their terrestrial identity to the sovereign God takes the reader back to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10-11, and two details there regarding God's apportionment of the earth that are important for the context of the textual debate in Deuteronomy 32:8. First, the Table of Nations catalogs seventy nations, but Israel is not included in the inventory.[7] Second, the use of the same Hebrew root (פרד) in both passages to describe the "separation" of humankind and the nations substantiates the long-recognized observation of scholars that Genesis 10-11 are the backdrop to the statement in Deut. 32:8.[8] Israel alone is Yahweh's portion and so is not numbered among the seventy other nations. The referent of the number seventy, the "sons of Israel" (in MT), initially seemed understandable enough, for both Gen 46:27 and Exo. 1:5 state that 70 members of Jacob's family went down to Egypt in the days of Joseph.[9] Little thought was given, however, to the logic of the correlation: How is it that the number of the pagan nations was determined in relation to an entity (Israel) or individuals (Jacob and his household) that did not yet exist? Even if one contends that the correlation was in the mind of God

---

[5] בני אל is not an option for what was behind the LXX reading, as the Qumran support for Hebrew text underlying the unrevised LXX demonstrates. First, 4QDt^{q} has spaces for additional letters following the ל of its [ ]בני אל. 4QDt^{j} clearly reads בני אלוהים (Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156). See also Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269.

[6] Göttingen LXX, 347; *Origenis Hexaplorum, Tomus I : Prolegomena, Genesis-Esther* , 320. The manuscript of Aquila is Codex 85.

[7] As one scholar notes, "On investigation the reader is struck by a deliberate pattern in the selection of names for the Table. For example, of the sons of Japheth, who number seven, two are selected for further listing. From those two sons come seven grandsons, completing a selective list of fourteen names under Japheth. With Ham's thirty descendants and Shem's twenty-six, the grand total is seventy" (Allen P. Ross, "Studies in the Book of Genesis - Part 2: The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 - its Structure," *BibSac* vol 137: 548 (Oct-Dec 1980): 342). As Ross notes in a footnote, some scholars arrive at the number of 71 for the names, depending on how the counting is done. This author would agree with Ross and Cassuto, whom he quotes, that the accurate number is seventy (cf. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 177–180.

[8] Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham*, 174–78; Albright, "Song of Moses," 343–44. Specifically, a Niphal form of פרד is used in Gen. 10:5 (נפרדו) and the Hiphil occurs in Deut. 32:8 (בהפרידו).

[9] There is a textual debate on this passage in Exodus as well. Although space prohibits a thorough treatment of these texts, they do provide an example, in conjunction with Deut. 32:8, of what is truly the primary guiding principle in textual criticism: the reading that best explains the rise of the others is most likely original. Put another way, which reading has the strongest explanatory power? In the case of Gen. 46:27 and Exo. 1:5, LXX and Qumran disagree with MT together when they read that 75 people went to Egypt with Jacob. MT's 70 is most likely original here, because the number 75 is quite demonstrably a later "correction" of MT, since it incorporates five additional descendants from Ephraim and Manasseh. This example from 46:27 and Exo. 1:5 features the same textual alignment as with Deut. 32:8 (LXX and Qumran agree together *against* MT), but here MT is to be preferred. The point is that one cannot be biased in favor of either MT or LXX, but that the reading that best explains the rise of the others is the preferred reading, regardless of the text-type.

prior to Israel's existence and only recorded much later, what possible point would there be behind connecting the pagan Gentile nations numerically with the children of promise? On the other hand, what could possibly be meant by the textual option that created a correspondence between the number of the nations in Genesis 10-11 and heavenly beings?

Literary and conceptual parallels discovered in the literature of Ugarit, however, have provided a more coherent explanation for the number 70 in Deuteronomy 32:8 - and have furnished powerful ammunition to textual scholars who argued against the "sons of Israel" reading in MT. Ugaritic mythology plainly states that the head of its pantheon, El (who, like the God of the Bible, is also referred to as El Elyon, the "Most High") fathered 70 sons,[10] thereby setting the number of the "sons of El" (Ugaritic, bn ʾil). An unmistakable linguistic parallel with the Hebrew text underlying the LXX reading was thus discovered, one which prompted many scholars to accept the LXX reading on logical and philological grounds: God (El Elyon in Deut. 32:8) divided the earth according to the number of heavenly beings who already existed from the time of creation.[11] The coherence of this explanation notwithstanding, some commentators resist the LXX reading, at least in part because they fear that an acceptance of the בני אלים/ אלהים (bny ʾlym / ʾlhym) readings (both of which may be translated "sons of gods") somehow requires assent to the notion that Yahweh is the author of polytheism. This apprehension thus prompts text-critical defenses of MT in Deuteronomy 32:8, such as that of David L. Stevens.[12]

This author contends that the choice of MT in Deuteronomy 32:8 is based on a misunderstanding of both the textual history of the Hebrew Bible and text-critical methodology, prejudiced evaluation of non-MT texts, and an unfounded concern that departure from the MT reading results in "Israelite polytheism." The primary goal of the present article is to show that understanding "sons of God" as the correct reading in Deuteronomy 32:8 in no way requires one to view Israelite religion as polytheistic. Toward that end, some selected comments on the text-critical issues are necessary.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND THE "SONS OF GOD" IN DEUTERONOMY 32:8

A Word About Text-Critical Methodology

The textual evidence cited above presents a situation where one reading (that of LXX) is supported by very ancient manuscript evidence (notably Qumran), while the other (MT's reading) has a preponderance of the support, thereby creating an "oldest versus most" predicament. As in similar New Testament cases, the correct reading cannot be verified merely by counting manuscripts, but by weighing them. Hence it matters little that the LXX reading is "outnumbered," especially since the more numerous

---

10 Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin, eds., *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places,* KTU: second, enlarged edition (Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), 18 (herafter = *KTU*). The reading in the article is from *KTU* 1.4:VI.46.

11 Job 38:7 informs us that the heavenly host was present at creation.

12 David E. Stevens, "Does Deuteronomy 32:8 Refer to 'Sons of God' or 'Sons of Israel'?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April-June 1997): 139.

sources are all recent as manuscript evidence goes, and in fact are interdependent, not independent, witnesses. Additonally, the assumption of MT-superiority should have no place in the objective evaluation of variants in the Old Testament text. Naturally, it would be equally fallacious to presuppose the priority of the LXX. Very simply, *no text* should be assigned *a priori* superiority at any point in a text-critical investigation. Determination of the best reading must be based on internal considerations, not uncritical, external presumptions about divine guidance over the "correct" text.

Unfortunately, the notion of the presumed sanctity of MT still persists. The dictum that MT is to be preferred over all other traditions whenever it cannot be faulted linguistically or for its content, unless in isolated cases there is good reason for favoring another tradition, is all too enthusiastically echoed.[13] This idea seems to suggest that whenever an MT reading *could* be accepted it *should* be accepted. Such an approach hardly does justice to non-MT readings that also *could* be acceptable on their own linguistic and contextual terms. Put another way, the above mantra never addresses *why* we must hold MT in such esteem. Where there are wide and significant textual divergencies between MT and the LXX, many textual studies have shown that the Qumran witnesses demonstrate the reliability of the transmission of the Hebrew text underlying the LXX.[14] For example, it is well known that the MT of the books of Samuel is in poor condition in a number of places, suffering instances of significant haplography.[15] The books of Kings are riddled with both short and lengthy pluses and minuses, transpositions, and chronological differences.[16] Likewise, portions of the MT of Ezekiel, especially chapters 1 and 10, could serve as a veritable digest of textual corruptions.[17] Lastly, the MT of the book of Jeremiah is fully one-sixth*longer* than the text of the LXX.[18] If the widely-followed principle of textual criticism that *ectio brevior praeferenda est* ("the shorter reading is to be preferred" – due to a scribe's tendency to add rather than delete words) has any merit at all, the MT of Jeremiah would have to be considered an undeniably expansionistic text.

Prejudicial Evaluation of Texts Outside the MT Tradition

Judging by the survival in Old Testament textual criticism of a "textus receptus" approach like the one which once held sway in New Testament textual criticism, there has apparently been little thoughtful consideration as to *how* the MT came to be considered the "received text." Just because the MT was the received text of the medieval Masoretes does not prove it merits textual priority among today's extant witnesses, or that it had textual priority in biblical times. The MT rose to prominence

---

13 Ernst Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, translated by Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: MacMillan Company, 1957), 76–82.

14Use Ulrich on Samuel here.

15 P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel,* Anchor Bible, vol. 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980); idem, *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 38.

16 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 142.

17 Daniel Block, "Text and Emotion: A Study in the 'Corruptions' in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1:4-28)," *CBQ* 50 (July 1988): 418–442.

18 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 320 ff.

only after centuries of textual *diversity*, and not, as noted above, by "intrinsic factors related to the textual transmission, but by political and socioreligious events and developments."[19]

The evidence from Qumran unquestionably testifies to a certifiable textual *plurality* among Jews in Palestine for the period between the third century B.C. and the first century A.D.[20] Three independent texts of the Old Testament, the precursory forms of MT, the LXX, and the SP existed and are attested at Qumran *without any evidence for the suppression of the non-MT texts*. The mere fact that the Hebrew base for the LXX was found at Qumran as early as the third century B.C.*and was not suppressed* by the Qumranites demonstrates that this text was *not* confined to Egypt's borders or considered inferior. As further proof of textual diversity, the Qumran material also contains "independent" or "unaligned" texts," which exhibit equal agreement and disagreement with the three major recognized textual traditions of MT, LXX, and the Samaritan Pentateuch.[21] The Qumran fragments that support the LXX "sons of God" reading, 4QDeut ^{j,n}, are among the unaligned texts.[22]

Two points derive from this rehearsal of the textual plurality at Qumran. First, no evidence exists in the actual textual data that the Jews held a negative view of Hebrew texts not grouped among those which would later receive the appellation "Masoretic." Second, the undeniable textual diversity at Qumran argues *against* any suggestion that the Qumranites altered a text ultimately used by the LXX translators as their *Vorlage*. Besides the chronological and logistical difficulties of such an idea, the question remains: If the Qumran members were in the habit of altering texts to reflect allegedly strange angelic views or Gnostic tendencies, why did they leave so many texts within *each* of the major textual strains *unaltered*? Put another way, why did the inhabitants of Qumran allow so many passages of the Hebrew Bible which point to God's uniqueness, omnipotence, and sole sovereignty to stay in the texts they deposited in the nearby caves? It hardly makes sense to sneak one alteration into Deuteronomy 32:8 while leaving hundreds of other "non dualistic" texts remain.

Evaluating the Internal Text-Critical Evidence for Deuteronomy 32:8

Two explanations might be offered by those who assume the priority of MT as to why Deuteronomy 32:8 reads "sons of God" in some manuscripts, including the Qumran material. One option is that this reading should simply be regarded as an intentional error

---

[19] Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)," 395, 407. Tov summarizes the historical situation as follows: "By the end of the 1st century A.D. the LXX had been accepted by Christianity and abandoned by Jews. Copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch were available, but in the meantime that sect had become an independent religion, so that their texts were considered Samaritan, not Jewish anymore. The Qumran sect, which had preserved a multitude of texts, did not exist after the destruction of the temple. Therefore the sole texts that existed in this period were the ones that were copied and distributed by the central group in Judaism . . . This situation gave rise to the wrong conclusion that the MT had 'ousted' the other texts."

[20] Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 116–117. See also S. Talmon, "The Old Testament Text," in P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans, eds., *Cambridge History of the Bible,* vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963): 159–199.

[21] Ibid., 395, 402, 404, 406.

[22] Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)," 402.

reflecting the theological predilections of Qumran and the LXX translators. This theory has already been called into question. The other option would involve an unintentional origin for the variant. Specifically, it could be argued that accidental omission of the consonants ישׂר from the word ישׂראל occured by parablepsis, leaving בני אל in the text in the place of בני ישׂראל.[23] This explanation satisfies Stevens, for it "gives priority to the Masoretic text."[24] Exactly *why* the student of the text should strive to give MT priority is not explained. Nevertheless, the proposal is plausible, since parablepsis is a very common cause of textual corruption. This explanation is less than satisfactory for at least two reasons.

First, one could just as well argue that ישׂר was *added* to the text. This is hardly a satisfying response, however, for it is as much of a speculation as the competing proposition. The real problem with the parablepsis proposal is that, while it accounts for the consonants אל in the text, it fails to adequately explain how the consonants והים- would have come to be *added* after אל to the text underlying the LXX reading. It is particularly significant in this regard that the texts from Qumran which support the LXX clearly do *not* read the consonants בני אל as this explanation would postulate, for in one text, 4QDeut^{q}, there are clearly additional spaces for additional consonants after the ל of the word אל. The other Dead Sea text which supports the LXX reading, 4QDeut^{j}, certainly reads בני אלהים.[25] By way of explanation, if all the witnesses to the "sons of God" variant read בני אל, this explanation would carry more weight, for it would be very easy to argue that בני אל was indeed the result of the loss of ישׂר before an original בני ישׂראל. However, when a Hebrew text reads בני אלהים as in the case of 4QDeut^{j}, or [ים]בני אל as various scrolls scholars have filled in the lacunae of the 4QDeut^{q}, one must explain the added consonants, since a word such as ישׂראלהים is nonsensical. Advocates of such a parablepsis hypothesis would logically be forced to argue that the text in question not only suffered parablepsis, but that a scribe later deliberately inserted the extra letters after the parablepsis occurred. The unlikelihood of this intellectual retreat is manifest. Typically, scribes *altered* or *deleted* letters deliberately to "protect" God or to correct theology (such as with the *tiqqune sopherim*).[26] The occasions where scribes desired the reader to observe a different consonantal

---

23 Stevens (137-138) calls this omission homoioteleuton (a skip of the eye due to same or similar endings of words), but parablepsis is the more accurate term describing what Stevens believes occurred, the copyist's eye skipping from the yodh at the end of בני to the aleph of אל, thereby causing the alleged omission of consonants. The variant really would not have been caused by a similarity in word endings, but would actually be a kind of "mental parablepsis," due to the familiarity of the scribe with the phrases בני אלהים or בני אלים. What this requires is that the scribe would have written "בני" and then, mentally expecting אלהים or אלים to follow, wrote "אל" instead of ישׂראל.

24 Ibid., 138.

25 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 269.

26 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 64–66. See also Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1981): 211–214; and Ellis Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994): 117–118.

text are well known, such as with the system of *Kethiv-Qere* or through suspended letters.[27] There is no such Masoretic directive for Deuteronomy 32:8.

Second, and perhaps even more damaging to the proposed parablepsis explanation that an original "sons of Israel" was unintentionally corrupted to “sons of God” in Deuteronomy 32:8, is that there exists another text-critical problem in Deuteronomy 32 in which divine beings - "sons of אלהים / אלים" are the focus (v. 43)![28] Deuteronomy 32:43 reads differently in the MT, the LXX, and a Qumran text. Tigay has the three texts laid out in parallel in his commentary on Deuteronomy. The text is shown by Tigay in its literary structure of bicolons (note the references to “divinities” and “sons of the divine”):[29]

Masoretic Text	**4QDeut^{q}**	**LXX**
A1. O nations, rejoice His people	O heavens, rejoice with Him	O heavens, rejoice with Him
A2..	Bow to Him, all divinities	Bow to Him, all sons of the divine
A3.		O nations, rejoice with His people
A4.		And let all angels of the divine Strengthen themselves in Him.
B1. For He’ll avenge the blood of	For He’ll avenge the blood of	For He’ll avenge the blood of
B2. His servants,	His sons,	His sons, Be vengeful
And wreak vengeance	And wreak vengeance	And wreak vengeance And recompense justice
On His foes,	on His foes,	on His foes,
C1.	Requite those who reject Him,	Requite those who reject Him,
C2. And will	And will	And the Lord will
Cleanse His people’s land.	Cleanse His people’s land.	Cleanse His people’s land.

Tigay asserts that the MT here is demonstrably incomplete when the structure of the text is analyzed and the resulting minuses are assessed.[30] It is significant that the MT lacks a parallel colon in what should be the first pairing (or double pairing if one follows the LXX). Even more striking is the fact that this missing colon is the one in which reference is made to divine beings in the Qumran and LXX texts. In the Qumran and LXX texts, every colon has its partner. This argues strongly that the MT originally had a pairing of colons (a bicolon), a pairing that was deliberately eliminated to avoid the reference to other “divine beings."[31] Tigay provides a well-reasoned explanation for the superfluous nature of the LXX’s extra bicolon (A3-A4) and some of the alternate wordings.[32] What is significant in his argumentation is that while the other MT minuses

---

27 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 57.

28 The translation of the LXX used by Tigay could reflect אלים instead of אלהים since "divine" rather than "God" is chosen as the translation. If the former option was indeed the *Vorlage* reading, a translation of "divine ones" is more accurate.

29 Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 516.

30 Ibid., 314, 516ff.

31 Ibid., 516.

32 Ibid., 516ff.

can be explained by haplography, the absence of the colon that would have made reference to divine beings cannot be so explained.[33]

What are the implications of this "parallel corruption"? For one, those who defend MT priority would have to argue for accidental changes in Deuteronomy 32:8 (the missing -ישׂר) and 32:43 that produce false readings in favor of angelic beings in *both* cases, while simultaneously accounting for the full range of consonants in אלהים in 4QDeut[j]. Such a coincidence is possible, but it stretches credulity to argue that the MT of Deuteronomy 32:8 and 43 best represents the original text when the exclusion of divine beings in 32:43 is so obviously a textual minus, and its conceptual parallel in 32:8 cannot coherently account for how the LXX reading for 32:8 may have arisen. It is far more likely both texts were intentionally altered *in MT* for the *same* reason: to eliminate a reference to divine beings in the name of expunging allegedly polytheistic language. It is inconceivable to suppose that a scribe would have done the reverse, altering an innocuous בני ישׂראל to a potentially explosive בני אלהים. The LXX reading therefore sufficiently explains how the MT reading could have arisen, but the alternative fails this test.

DEUTERONOMY 32:8 IN LIGHT OF GOD'S DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Although some may fear that to adopt the reading of LXX amounts to embracing the notion that Yahweh is the author of polytheism, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, a proper understanding of the concept of the divine council in the Old Testament provides a decisive argument in favor of the LXX / Qumran reading.

It is no secret that the Old Testament often reflects literary and religious contact between Israel and her ancient near eastern neighbors. One example of such contact concerns a "divine council" or "divine assembly" presided over by a chief deity.[34] A number of passages in the Hebrew Bible depict God presiding over a council of divine beings, and these passages often describe the divine council's membership and function with precise terminology utilized in ancient near eastern literature for the judicial oversight of their pantheons over the cosmos. Of particular interest to the study at hand are the Ugaritic texts, since that language bears such a close linguistic affinity to Biblical Hebrew.[35]

---

[33] Ibid., 516ff.

[34] The major work on the divine council is by E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 24 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1980). Related to Mullen's work, but focusing on more specific aspects of the divine council are: Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro–Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), and Conrad L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods: El,* Baʿal*, and the* Rephaʾim, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 21 (Scholars Press, 1979).

[35] Stanislav Segert, *A Basic Grammar of the Ugaritic Language: With Selected Texts and Glossary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), x, 13–15. The present study will focus on material from Ugarit, but the concepts delineated in the body of this paper can also be found throughout the literature of ancient Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

The Divine Council in the Old Testament

One of the examples of the divine council assembled for deliberation in the Hebrew Bible is I Kings 22:19-23 (cf. II Chron. 18:18-22).[36] I Kings 22:1-18 introduces the political alliance forged between Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Israel for invading Ramoth-Gilead, the rubber-stamping of the plan by four hundred prophets of Israel, and Jehoshaphat's insistence on hearing from a true prophet of Yahweh concerning the matter. The king of Israel reveals that there is indeed a prophet of Yahweh, Micaiah ben Imlah, but that Micaiah never prophesies anything favorable concerning him. Micaiah is summoned, and at first he mockingly prophesies blessing for the invasion, but his duplicity is detected immediately by Jehoshaphat. This sets the stage for Micaiah's genuine vision (emphasis mine):

> 19 Micaiah continued, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: ***I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left.*** 20 And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?' ***One suggested this, and another that.*** 21 Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' 22 'By what means?' the LORD asked. 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.' 23 So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you."

In a scene that resembles Ugaritic council scenes, Yahweh is pictured as the chief deity,[37] enthroned among the members of His council before directly addressing its members, who "stand" (a technical term[38]) before Him.[39] The question asked by Yahweh occurs in a form paralleled in Ugaritic literature and other passages involving Yahweh's presence in the Hebrew Bible.[40] The omniscient leader then approves the course of action He knows will be successful, and the messenger (the "spirit"[41] here, but often a prophet) is commissioned. It is not that Yahweh is lacking ideas, or that the members of the council exercise any actual authority, but rather that the council only

---

[36] Other than the two primary examples of the council in the Hebrew Bible offered in the body of this paper, see Job 1,2 and Zech. 3:1–8.

[37] The chief deity and leader of the council at Ugarit was El. The Hebrew text makes it clear that El is Israel's God as well (although the אֵל of the Bible does not share his Ugaritic counterpart's behaviors; cf. אֵל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - "El, the God of Israel"; Gen. 33:20), and that Yahweh is El (cf. Deut. 7:9; 10:17; II Sam. 22:31 [parallelism]; Ps. 85:9; Isa. 42:5; Jer. 32:8). The equation in the literature is also seen by virtue of the numerous epithets at Ugarit for the high god El that are used of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible (see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 44–76).

[38] Mullen, *The Divine Council,* p. 207, 209–226. In this regard, it is interesting to note Isaiah 6:2 in the LXX, where the angelic beings in the passage stand *before* Yahweh, not above him as in MT.

[39] Cf. *KTU* 1.16.V.9–28; *Ugaritica* V.2.I.2–4. See Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 205ff.

[40] Cf. *KTU* 1.16.V.10–11, 14–15, 17–18, 20–21.

[41] This is a common designation for Yahweh's / the council's messengers. See Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 206.

serves to "reemphasize and execute His decisions."[42] This is the same pattern as in the Ugaritic council texts.[43] Micaiah in this instance is permitted to observe the deliberations of the divine "boardroom meeting" and thus pronounce with certainty "thus saith the LORD" as a messenger of the divine assembly.

A second example of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible is Psalm 82. Setting the Hebrew text[44] in relation to the translation brings out the now familiar council language and the plurality of the אֱלֹהִים in question:

> 1 God (אֱלֹהִים) standeth in the congregation of the mighty (בַּעֲדַת־אֵל); he judgeth among the gods (אֱלֹהִים).
> 2 How long will ye judge (תִּשְׁפְּטוּ) unjustly, and accept (תִּשְׂאוּ) the persons of the wicked? Selah.
> 3 Defend (שִׁפְטוּ) the poor and fatherless: do justice (הַצְדִּיקוּ) to the afflicted and needy.
> 4 Deliver (פַּלְטוּ) the poor and needy: rid [them] (הַצִּילוּ) out of the hand of the wicked.
> 5 They (***the gods***) know not (לֹא יָדְעוּ), neither will they (***the gods***) understand (וְלֹא יָבִינוּ); they (***the gods***) walk on (יִתְהַלָּכוּ) in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course.
> 6 I have said, Ye [are] gods (אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם); and all of you [are] children of the most High (וּבְנֵי עֶלְיוֹן כֻּלְּכֶם).
> 7 But ye shall die (תְּמוּתוּן)[45] like Adam,[46] and fall (תִּפֹּלוּ) like one of the Shining Ones.[47]

---

[42] Ibid., 207.

[43] Ibid., 206.

[44] The text of MT is used here. As is noted in several of the studies cited subsequently, the only meaningful variant in the text is whether the first אֱלֹהִים should be replaced by יהוה. The choice makes no difference for the interpretation of the psalm.

[45] The verb form here, תְּמוּתוּן , is from the same root as used for the pronouncement on humankind in Gen. 2:17; 3:4. In the latter instance, the form is identical, save for defective spelling (תְּמֻתוּן).

[46] The Hebrew here is כְּאָדָם , and is usually translated "like men." Aside from the connection with the verb mentioned above in the ensuing discussion, the translation choice here is based on the work of Mullen (239-240) and Hugh Rowland Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of Its Reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 158–164. Page's is the most thorough and up to date work comparing the passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of a cosmic rebellion with those of Ugarit. The translation choice "Adam" reflects the connection that exists between (1) presence of the "Shining One" (Lucifer) in Isaiah 14:12–15 in the holy Mount - the Mount of the Assembly (the place where the council met) and the designation of Eden, the garden of God, as the Mount of Assembly in Ezekiel 28; and (2) the reference to a certain "Shining One" in Psalm 82:7 (see the preceding note on the verbal root for "you shall die," and the ensuing note below).

[47] The Hebrew here is כְּאַחַד הַשָּׂרִים , which is usually translated "like one of the princes," under the assumption that the noun הַשָּׂרִים is related to the Akkadian šarru, meaning "ruler, prince." This is the correct Akkadian cognate, but contrary to the assertion that the related verbal root šararu most likely does not mean "rise in splendor" (in reference to the sun, and so "shine"), subsequent scholarship has

8 Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.

This psalm has generated much scholarly controversy.[48] As many scholars who have tackled its contents have noted, the *crux interpretum* of the psalm is determining what אֱלֹהִים means in verses 1b and 6a.[49] How can God / אֱלֹהִים be said to be standing in the council of God / אֵל *in the midst* of (a singular) God / אֱלֹהִים ? It would seem obvious that the second אֱלֹהִים (v. 1b) must be pluralized, but since this allegedly smacks of polytheism, many commentators have resisted the translation "gods." Three major interpretations therefore exist for the אֱלֹהִים of 1b and 6a: (1) they are Israelite rulers and judges; (2) they are the rulers and judges of the nations; (3) they are members of the divine council / divine beings. In reality, the latter two options are both correct, and must be combined for an accurate interpretation of the psalm.[50]

As Cyrus Gordon pointed out over sixty years ago, translating אֱלֹהִים as "rulers" or "judges" is an option that lacks validity, and is an example of theologically "protecting" God.[51] Since Gordon adequately chronicles the examples where אֱלֹהִים is only speculatively translated as "rulers" or "judges,"[52] and demonstrates in each example that such a translation choice is unnecessary, this paper will focus on features of the psalm that compel the conclusion that אֱלֹהִים in v. 1b and 6a should be translated "gods" or, better, "divine beings."[53]

---

demonstrated otherwise (see *The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon,* ed. Jay P. Green (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 977b and 978a; hereafter, *BDB*). While there may be some question that the *verbal* form šararu may not be *used* with "shine" as its meaning, the adjective form šarūru certainly does mean "shining," as evidenced by its use to describe the planet Venus in astronomical texts (Page, 97, note 134) . Psalm 82:7 could therefore contain a substantive use of the cognate adjective (see also Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 239–240). The reference to a "Shining One" in 82:7 is paralleled by Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-17, where divine beings are in view (or where tales of divine beings form the backdrop for these passages). Ezekiel 28:13-16 and Isaiah 14:12-15 provide an overt linguistic connection between Eden and the holy Mount of Assembly where the divine council at Ugarit and in the Hebrew Bible held its meetings (cf. the ensuing discussion of the vocabulary used at Ugarit and in the Hebrew Bible). The *elohim* of Psalm 82:7 will die like Adam and fall like one of the "shining ones" did (cf. esp. Ezek. 28:12-17 here). The point of the verse is that the divine beings judged in the Psalm will be (or were) stripped of immortality and cast from their high estate, just as Adam and that divine being who was punished in the same manner earlier had been. It should be pointed out that this argument from the cognates is not necessary for proving that the personages in Psalm 82 are divine beings, since שַׂר in its meaning of "prince" is used in Daniel to identify divine beings - those אֱלֹהִים who still rule the nations - and Michael, guardian of God's portion, Israel (Dan. 10:13, 20-21; 12:1; cp. Deut. 4:19; 32:8-9).

[48] See Julian Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual* XIV (1939): 29-98; W. S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" *Biblica* 76:2 (1995), 219–228; and Lowell Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990), 51–66.

[49] Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" 219.

[50] Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 228, n. 195.

[51] Cyrus Gordon, "אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges,*" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139–144.

[52] For example, see *BDB*, 43a.

[53] While this author agrees with Gordon that אֱלֹהִים need not (and should not) be translated "judges" or "rulers" in Psalm 82 and his other examples, he disagrees with Gordon's conclusion that in at least two of

Several external considerations point to verses 1b and 6a as describing the divine council and its "divine beings." First, the fact that the אֱלֹהִים in 6a are called בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן is a strong argument for their divine nature, because עֶלְיוֹן is a completely transparent title for deity, in both Hebrew and Ugaritic. The word refers only to God / El in the Bible and Ugaritic religious texts.[54] The point here is that *the divine character of the offspring of El in the Ugaritic texts is beyond question.* That the same descriptive appellation for those offspring are used many times in the Hebrew Bible of nonhuman inhabitants of the heavens makes the translation "human judges" nonsensical[55] and requires ignoring the comparative semitic philology. Second, the terms and themes in this psalm are present in Ugaritic literature. Elyōn*, princes, gods,* are all present in the Ugaritic poem "the Gracious Gods," and it is quite telling that the notion above in Psalm 82:7 of the אֱלֹהִים "falling" like "one of the Shining Ones" is found "in a specific episode of Canaanite mythology, in which the fall of one of the bn šrm ("sons of the shining ones") of the heavenly congregation was depicted."[56] Third, the fact that the psalm speaks of rendering justice to the poor and needy does not argue for human judges, since the council terminology from Sumer, Akkad, and Ugarit "referred originally to the political organ of a primitive democracy, a phenomenon which can be discerned *in the pantheons* of various non-Israelite cultures."[57] Lastly, verses such as Isaiah 24:21 ("In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below") clearly *distinguish* between the divine beings of Yahweh's host and earthly rulers.

---

these instances (Exodus 21:6 and 22:6-7) one should understand the term as referring to household gods/idols. Gordon cites certain oath-taking examples in the Nuzi dialect of Akkadian in favor of his decision, but admits that other Akkadian parallels (e.g. Hammurabi's Code) have a *singular* deity in view. This author would prefer to translate אֱלֹהִים in these texts (and others) as simply "God" or "gods," and not "household gods/idols" or "judges." That such an effort has been exerted to identify these beings as humans ought also to inform the reader that אֱלֹהִים in these texts (and especially Psalm 82) does *not* refer to mere angels (i.e., מלאכים). The comparative semitic data make it clear that the members of the council had a higher status than these "messenger" beings.

[54] Genesis 14:18ff. (God *Most High*). On the use of עֶלְיוֹן at Ugarit as either an epithet of El or a "double name of a single god," see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 51. The word's use in Genesis 14:18–22, especially along with the phrase "Creator of heaven and earth" (קֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ ; 14:22) presents a firm linguistic appearance in the Hebrew text of one of Canaanite El's titles (*qanu* ʾarṣ). See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 50–52.

[55] See Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 34.

[56] Ibid., 34.

[57] Matitiahu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40-41 (1969-1970), 127; Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion,* 158–164. In all these ancient religions, as well as the theology of the Hebrew Bible, the gods / God and their/ his council were *supposed* to render right judgment for the oppressed and the poor (see Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 231ff.; see esp. 233–38). The earth itself was founded on justice (Isa. 28:16ff.) and each member of the council had his own earthly responsibilities (Deut. 4:19 and 32:8-9, reading with LXX and Qumran). As Cyrus Gordon also notes, "The duty of rulers (gods and kings alike) is to protect the weak from the strong" (Cyrus Gordon, "History of Religion in Psalm 82," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor,* ed. Gary A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 129–31 (see esp. 130).

Internal features of Psalm 82 place the argument that אֱלֹהִים in v. 1b and 6a are divine beings and not human judges beyond dispute. Two recent articles on Psalm 82 have produced a number of structural proofs in favor of divine beings rather than humans.[58] Two observations will suffice here:

1. Psalm 82:1 has a chiastic structure that compels the understanding that the second אֱלֹהִים refers to divine, not human, beings:

אֱלֹהִים	נִצָּב	בַּעֲדַת־אֵל	בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים	יִשְׁפֹּט
a		b	b	a

2 The particle אָבֵן in verse 7 indicates "a strong antithetical relationship with v. 6."[59] The presence of אָמַרְתִּי introducing the clause prior to אָבֵן has been demonstrated to require a translation of roughly "I had thought . . . but."[60] The contrast is, of course, between the speaker of verse 6, Yahweh (who in either view is the only one who has the authority to render the death sentence for these אֱלֹהִים) and the אֱלֹהִים of verse 6a – the word being in parallel to בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן. Consequently, interpreting the phrase "you shall die like Adam" to be referring to *human* judges would contradict the contrasts required by the syntax. It would also require ignoring the parallel here with the judgment on Adam and Eve. The point is not that the אֱלֹהִים were put to death at the moment Yahweh judged them, but that they *must die as a result of their actions* (i.e., they would become mortal).[61] Moreover, it is patently illogical. As Smick noted, "if they are going to die *like* mortals, they are not mortals."[62] The immortality of those suffering this judgment is clearly presupposed.[63]

The Divine Council and the Vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew

---

[58] Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" 222ff.; Handy, "Sounds, Words, and Meanings in Psalm 82," 51-66. See also Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 226ff.

[59] Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" 226.

[60] Morgenstern, 33.

[61] Morgenstern, 73–74. This does not rule out the possibility, as some argue, that Adam and Eve possessed contingent immortality before the Fall. In that case, their punishment would involve removing that contingency (namely the tree of life from which they ate) which maintained their immortality. The effect would be the same – they were now fully mortal, and could not avoid death.

[62] Elmer Smick, "Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982): 95.

[63] It does no good to suggest that the †אֱלֹהִים† in question are humans who thought themselves to be divine, for the text does not say this, and, more importantly, because it would put such words in the mouth of Yahweh (the verb is first singular, not second plural). Lastly, to object that it is impossible to conceive of gods dying like men in an attempt to argue for human beings as the †אֱלֹהִים† is to actually sound polytheistic in orientation, for the objection would be based on the *assumption* that the plural אֱלֹהִים have the same qualitative essence (noncontingent immortality) as Yahweh. The point here is that if more than one being possessed noncontingent immortality, the result would be true polytheism. It is necessary to recognize a distinction between Deity (God) and divinity (god-likeness) as a solution for reconciling the plural †אֱלֹהִים† and Israelite monotheism.

The texts above (and others) are all the more convincing once the Ugaritic terminology for the divine council is compared with the vocabulary of biblical Hebrew. Such a comparison yields both semantic congruences and exact philological equivalents.

Terminology for the Assembly[64]

The literature of Ugarit has a number of designations for the divine assembly/ council. The two most common at Ugarit are pḫr , with its related form mpḫr , both meaning "congregation, assembly,"[65] and dr ,[66] meaning "generation, assemblage."[67] The phrases pḫr ʾilm ("congregation of the gods"), mpḫrt bn ʾilm ("congregation of the sons of the gods"), and dr bn ʾil ("generation of the sons of El") are quite common.[68] None of these forms are used in the Hebrew Bible in terms of exact *linguistic* equivalence, though their *conceptual* equivalence will become clear.

A common appellation for the divine assembly at Ugarit is ʿdt ʾilm ("assembly of the gods"[69]), a phrase that corresponds exactly to the one in Psalm 82:1 ("the בַּעֲדַת אֵל ; the "assembly of God"). Another biblical Hebrew term for the council that has an equivalent in Ugaritic is סוֹד ("assembly"[70]). For example, in Jeremiah 23:18, 22 one reads:[71]

> (18) But which of them has stood in the council (בְּסוֹד) of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?
> (22) But if they had stood in my council (בְּסוֹדִי), they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.

Reminiscent of this scene is Isaiah's vision of Yahweh in Isaiah, where Isaiah, upon seeing Yahweh enthroned and ministered to by seraphim, hears Yahweh speak: "*Who shall I send*, and *who will go **for us***?" The winged creatures in the chapter have undeniable parallels in the Ugaritic council scenes.[72] In fact, visions or auditory

---

64 The fullest treatment of this topic occurs in Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 111–127.

65 Marjo Christina Annette Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Munster: Ugarit Verlag, 1990), 269; Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual,* Analecta Orientalia 35 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1955), 312.

66 There is no Canaanite shift in Ugaritic, hence long "a" instead of an "o" vowel.

67 Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual,* 256.

68 For example, *KTU* 1.47:29; 1.148; 1.40:25; 1.65:3; 1.2 (cf. E. Theodore Mullen, "Divine Assembly," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. II, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 214–215.

69 Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual,* 303. For example, see *KTU* 1.15:II.7,11

70 For example, see Psalm 55:14 (Heb. = 15; translated "throng" in NIV); Jer. 6:11 ("assembly" in KJV); Prov. 15:22 ("advisers" in NIV). For the Ugaritic, see *KTU* 1.20:I.4; Korpel, 271.

71 Note the translation "counsel" instead of "council" in the KJV here as another example of how the linguistic parallels with the ancient near eastern "council" terminology are missed.

72 Ibid., 207. Mullen argues that the winged creatures/ seraphim are council *members,* but elsewhere in his book Mullen notes that such fiery (cf. the root ṣrp for the seraphim) messengers are mere emissaries to the council at Ugarit (140). The major study in regard to the hierarchicy of divine beings is that of Lowell

revelations of Yahweh and His divine council were viewed in the Hebrew Bible as an authentication of the veracity of the prophet's message and status – a sort of test of true "propheticity."[73]

Terminology for the Members of the Assembly[74]

Ugaritic regularly refers to heavenly beings as pḫr kkbm (the "congregation of the stars"[75]), language corresponding with כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר ("morning stars"; in parallelism with the "sons of God" in Job 38:7) and כּוֹכְבֵי אֵל (the "stars of God"; Isa. 14:13). Aside from the context of these references, each of which clearly points to personal beings, not astronomical phenomena, it is significant that in the entire ancient near eastern literary record, El is never identified with a heavenly body. Thus "the stars of El" points to created beings with divine status.[76] The Hebrew Bible also uses קְדֹשִׁים ("holy ones") and צְבָאוֹת ("hosts") for inhabitants of heaven, a term not utilized at Ugarit for the heavenly host.[77] The "hosts" of Yahweh (יהוה צְבָאוֹת) constitutes an umbrella term which includes the variety of categories of nonhuman beings who serve God.[78] In fact, one study has specifically linked the "host" of heaven, the divine council, and the Hebrew Bible's portrait of Yahweh as a warrior.[79]

Handy (*Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy*). Handy argues that the *seraphim* at Ugarit and in the Hebrew Bible are only messenger "gods" (a term appropriate only for a polytheistic context), had no independent personal volition, were clearly a sub-class (even in Jewish tradition), and were most likely the "security guards" of the heavenly throne room where the council met (151–56). They are thus only servants of the council membership and its head, not members. My own position is that the whole heavenly host constitutes the divine council (cf. I Kings 22:19) but that there was a strict hierarchical arrangement within the council.

[73]The foundational study for demonstrating that the divine council forms the background for the commissioning of the prophet was that of H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1944): 151–57. See also in this regard Christopher Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109:2 (1990): 229–47; Frank M. Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953): 274-277; Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 215ff.

[74] The fullest discussion of this topic is found in Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 175–208. See also Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds,* 269–99.

[75] *KTU* 1.10:I.4.

[76] Ulf Oldenburg, "Above the Stars of El: El in Ancient South Arabic Religion," *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82 (1970): 187-208 (cf. 197).

[77] See Psalm 89:6-7 (Hebr.= 89:7-8); Zech 14:5; Job 5:1; 15:15 (Qere); Carol A. Newsom, "Angels," *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. I, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 248. For example, see Psalm 89:9 (Eng. = 89:8); 103:21.

[78] See Psalm 103:19-21; 148:1-5. However, several passages unambiguously include divine beings among the heavenly host. See also Isaiah 24:21 ("And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, [צְבָא הַמָּרוֹם בַּמָּרוֹם] and the kings of the earth upon the earth") with other passages that describe divine beings that dwell in the "heights," such as Isaiah 14:12–15.

[79] Patrick D. Miller, "The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 101-107.

The members of the assembly at Ugarit are unambiguously classified as ʾilm ("gods"), bn ʾil ("sons of El"), and bn ʾilm ("sons of the gods").[80] Specifically, in the Keret Epic, the Canaanite chief deity El sits at the head of the assembly and four times addresses its members as either ʾilm ("gods") or bny ("my sons").[81] Occurrences of these designations referring to heavenly beings in the Hebrew Bible are well known (see chart below). Both Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew use mlʾk ("messenger," typically translated "angel") to denote heavenly beings of a lower order than the "sons of god" or "divine ones." Just as at Ugarit and elsewhere, in the Hebrew Bible, the terms above (אֱלֹהִים , אֵלִים , or the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים) and the מַלְאָכִים are not to be equated. All these divine beings are members of Yahweh's council, but within that council a hierarchy exists.[82] As Handy notes, at no point are the מַלְאָכִים ever designated as either אֱלֹהִים , אֵלִים , or the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew text.[83] The practice of some English Bible translations to render all these terms alike as "angels" blurs the distinctions and obscures the textual testimony to the divine council. The lack of specificity inherent in the Greek New Testament vocabulary is also a problem with respect to discerning not only the levels of the divine council, but the council's presence itself.[84]

Terminology for the Meeting Place of the Assembly[85]

In Ugaritic mythology, El and his council met to govern the cosmos at the "sources of the two rivers," in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep," and in the "domed tent" of El, located on the mountain of El, Mount Ṣapanu.[86] This mountainous meeting place was also designated pḫr mʿd, the place of the "assembled congregation,"[87] and was associated with both physical and mythical peaks to the north of Ugarit.[88] In like manner, Yahweh's sanctuary is on a mountain (Mount Zion) which is located in the

---

[80] In addition to the citations above containing references to the ʾilm, see *KTU* 1.16; 1.15; 1.40:7–8, 42; cf. Mullen, "Divine Assembly," 215.

[81] See Mullen, "Divine Assembly" *KTU* 1.16.V.1-28 for El's leadership in the council. On this topic in general, see Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 183ff.

[82] Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven,* 151–59; Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 210ff.; Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds,* 289ff. See *KTU* 1.2:I.11; 1.13:25. See Gen. 28:12 as one example of many in the Hebrew Bible.

[83] Ibid., 158–59.

[84] Part of the problem is that the Greek New Testament does not make a vocabulary distinction, having only ἄγγελος (which can have a heavenly denizen in mind or a mere human messenger). This problem is similar to that of the New Testament's limited vocabulary for alcoholic beverages. Whereas the Old Testament has nearly a half dozen words for such beverages, the New Testament uses οἶνος.

[85] The fullest treatments of this item occurs in Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 128–74, and Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament,* Harvard Semitic Monographs IV (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 34-176.

[86] Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 36; Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 370; Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain,* 98-160. See *KTU* 1.4; 1.2:III; 1.3:V.5–7; 1.6:I 32–34; 1.101:2; 1.3:III.29

[87] Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 269.

[88] Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain,* 34-160.

"heights of the north," the יַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן (Psalm 48:1-2).[89] The "height of Zion" is a "well-watered garden" (Jer. 31:12; Isa. 33:20-22), and in Ezekiel 28:13-16, the terms "mountain of God" and "garden of God" (not to mention Eden) are paralleled. The mountain of Yahweh is also called the הַר מוֹעֵד ("mount of assembly"), again located in יַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן (the "heights of the north/Ṣaphon"; Isa. 14:13). The "domed tent," of course, evokes the imagery of the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle.[90]

Summation

The terms above are not exhaustive, but are representative of the range of specific linguistic congruence between Ugarit religious literature and the Hebrew Bible relevant to the concept of the divine council. The data is summarized in transliteration below: [91]

[89] Additionally, *Shadday* may mean "mountain dweller." See Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 581; Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 48–60.

[90] Richard J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971): 221–27.

[91] Vocalization is, of course, supplied according to each language's conventional scheme. The verses supplied are not exhaustive, but only representative.

Ugaritic		**Hebrew Bible**	
Ugaritic alone			
pḫr ʾilm	"assembly of the gods"[92]		
dr bn ʾil	"generation of the sons of El"		
Ugaritic & Hebrew Bible			
ʾilm	"gods"	ʾᵉlōhîm or ʾēlîm	"gods" or "divine beings" or "godlike beings"; For example, see Job 41:25 (Heb. = 41:17); Psalm 58:5 (emended); 8:5 (Heb. = 8:6); 86:8; 97:7, 9; Exod. 15:11; Dan. 11:36
bn ʾil	"sons of the gods"	bᵉnê ʾēlîm or bᵉnê ʾᵉlōhîm or bᵉnê hāʾᵉlōhîm	Psalm 29:1; 89:6 (Heb. = 89:7); Gen. 6:2,4; Job 1:6; 2:1
bn ʾil ʿdt bn ʾilm	"sons of El" "assembly of the sons of El"[93]	See above with reference to bᵉnê ʾēlîm (in case *mem* is enclitic)	
ʿdt ʾilm ʿdt ʾil	"assembly of the gods" "assembly of El"[94]	ʿᵃdaṯ ʾēl	"assembly of God" - Ps. 82:1
šd	"assembly"	sôḏ yhwh sôḏ ʾᵉlôah	"assembly of Yahweh" – Jer. 23:18; "assembly of God" – Job 15:8
pḫr kkbm	"congregation of the stars"	kôḵᵉḇê bōqer kôḵᵉḇê ʾēl	"morning stars" (Job 38:7); "stars of God" (Isa. 14:13)
pḫr mʿd	"congregation of the assembly"; "assembled congregation"[95]	har môʿēḏ	"mount of assembly" (Isa. 14:13)
(mount) Ṣpn	"Zaphon"; a mountain to the north[96]	yarkᵉtê ṣaphôn	"heights of the north" (Psa. 48:1-2)
Hebrew Bible alone			
		qᵉḏōšîm or qōḏeš in a collective sense	"holy ones" ; Psalm 89:6-7 (Heb.= 89:7-8); Zech 14:5; Job 5:1; Job 15:15 (Qere)[97]
		ṣᵉḇāʾôt	"hosts" Isa. 13:4; 24:21 e.g.

[92] The *mem* on the end of ʾilīma may be enclitic, requiring a singular translation ("assembly of El"). Plural forms in reference to the council members occur in *KTU* 1.2.I. 18,20,22,23,24,26,27,29, and 34.

[93] Cf. *KTU* 1.4.III.14.

[94] Cf. *KTU* 1.15:II.7,11

[95] Cf. *KTU* 1.2.I.

[96] For a lengthy discussion of this terminology and its correspondences in biblical literature, see Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain,* 34-176; *idem.,* "Tent of El."

[97] Reading Zech. 14:5 with the LXX; see also Psa. 77:14; 93:5; Dan. 4:10,14,20.

Objections to the Reality of a Divine Council in the Old Testament

Some interpreters argue against the idea that the אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82:1b and 6a are divine beings by introducing the following texts:

> **Exodus 4:16** And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God (אֱלֹהִים).
> **Exodus 7:1** And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god (אֱלֹהִים) to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.

Since Moses is referred to as אֱלֹהִים , so the argument goes, the אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82:1b and 6a should also be taken as referring to human beings. This amounts to "apples and oranges" reasoning, and misses the point of the terminology in the pertinent verses. While it is true that Moses can be an אֱלֹהִים , how is it that we should use this fact wherever אֱלֹהִים occurs and does not refer to Yahweh? Put another way, this argument says that since אֱלֹהִים refers to a human being in these instances, it must in Psalm 82 – But why? As we have seen, the structural elements and parallelism of that Psalm argue against this conclusion, as does the logic of verse 6, as well as other passages that refer to plural אֱלֹהִים.[98] Denying the obvious in Psalm 82 accomplishes nothing toward ridding the Hebrew Bible of the existence of plural אֱלֹהִים .

The reason Moses is called אֱלֹהִים in Exodus 4:16 and 7:1 is that he is functioning in the manner of a member of God's council. Moses is not a mere messenger (he is not referred to as a מַלְאָךְ here). Unlike prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, who receive a singular commissioning in the presence of Yahweh's council, Moses regularly spoke to Yahweh "face to face." Moreover, his task went well beyond dispensing revelation; he was a *governing mediator*, effectively ruling Israel at God's behest. It is this governing at God's discretion which marks him as an אֱלֹהִים , much in the same way that Israel's king would be referred to as a "son of אֱלֹהִים ,"[99] terminology which needs no further comment. Whether it be before Pharaoh or his own people, Moses as אֱלֹהִים refers to the display of true divine authority, with all its bestowed dominion and protection.

---

[98] For example, Psalm 89:6-8 ("6 For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings (בְּנֵי אֵלִים)? 7 In the council of the holy ones (בְּסוֹד קְדֹשִׁים) God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him. 8 O LORD God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you"); Psalm 29:1-2 ("1 Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones (אֵלִים), ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness"); and Isaiah 24:21, which clearly distinguishes human rulers from the council אֱלֹהִים ("In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below"). The point with the latter is, what powers are there in heaven besides Yahweh? The אֱלֹהִים and the council are the only logical conclusion.

[99] Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:3 (assuming that the LXX – cf. Psalm 109 – is the original reading).

Another common objection involves John 10:34-36, where Jesus quotes Psalm 82:[100]

> 34 Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? 35 If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; 36 Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?

The point of this objection is that Jesus, by this quotation, is saying in effect that "since Psalm 82 has men being called אֱלֹהִים , then I can call myself the Son of God and claim equality with God." The presumed reference in verse 35 to the אֱלֹהִים being the recipients of the law (which would require they be human) supposedly confirms this exegesis. Unfortunately, this is a textbook example where New Testament scholars, lacking any knowledge of Ugaritic or other comparative semitic data, interpret the Hebrew text via the appeal to Jewish tradition,[101] or appeal to the previous generation of New Testament scholars who wrote before the discovery of the Ugaritic materials. Several points need to be made regarding Jesus' use of Psalm 82, for His hermeneutic amounts to a powerful testimony to His own deity.

First, the presumed (traditional) argument actually does nothing to advance Jesus' claim for deity, laid down earlier in verse 30 ("I and my Father are one"), for it amounts to Jesus claiming "I can call myself the son of God *just like other men* had the title אֱלֹהִים ." The point here is that the alleged humans in Psalm 82:1b and 6a *were still men*, despite their designation as אֱלֹהִים . One wonders where the power is in such an equation. Was Jesus merely arguing for a non-ontological title? This is hardly what He was asserting. This is no more an argument for the deity of Jesus than one could make for the deity of Moses from Exodus 4:16 and 7:1, where he is called an אֱלֹהִים . Second, it is important to observe that nowhere in the passage is the law actually mentioned. It is an assumption – and a flawed one at that – that the "word of God" in verse 35 is a reference to the reception of the Mosaic law. In fact, there is no reference to the law in all of Psalm 82. In reality the "word of God" that came to the אֱלֹהִים in question refers to the judgment rendered against them by the speaker (Yahweh) of Psalm 82:7: "But ye

---

[100] The MT and LXX agree in the verse quoted, and the quotation is exact.

[101] By "Jewish tradition" I mean the rabbinic opinion (again to "protect" God) that ʾelohīm here refers to men. By way of examples of New Testament scholarship's undiscriminating acceptance of this notion, see Jerome H. Neyrey, " 'I Said: You are Gods': Psalm 82:6 and John 10," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:4 (1989): 647-663 (esp. 653ff, where the author cites a variety of midrashic interpretations, and in turn considers John 10:34-36 as a midrash); W. Gary Phillips, "An Apologetic Study of John 10:34-36," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (Oct-Dec 1989): 405-419 (Phillips fails to interact with scholarly literature on Psalm 82 or the divine council); and James S. Ackerman, "The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *Harvard Theological Review* 59 (1966): 186-191. Ackerman points out that the notion that the "gods" of Psalm 82 refer to human judges stems exclusively from rabbinic concerns for orthodoxy. Ackerman rejects the typical interpretation of human judges in favor of another midrashic interpretation – that "gods" refers to the Israelites who received the law. Other than the fact that the law is nowhere in view in Psalm 82, and that the New Testament tradition that the law was given via angelic beings creates a text-critical conundrum (see footnote 107 and this author's paper which provides a solution to this), Ackerman's thesis is based on the assumption that the rabbis who offer this solution took Psalm 82 out of context to do it – and that Jesus did the same (see p. 188).

shall die like Adam, and fall like one of the Shining Ones."[102] Even if this text did somehow refer to the giving of the law, it would point once again to the אֱלֹהִים in Psalm 82:6 being divine beings, for there is a definite connection in the Old Testament between the giving of the law and Yahweh's divine council:

> Deuteronomy 33:2 (NIV) - He said, **The Lord came from Sinai**, and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from mount Paran. He came **with myriads of holy ones** from the south, from his mountain slopes.[103]

By his use of Psalm 82:6, Jesus was not arguing that he deserved a title shared by other mere mortals. He was reminding his Jewish adversaries of the existence of the other divine beings – the אֱלֹהִים - in Yahweh's divine council. Their own Scripture affirmed the notion that Yahweh was not the only אֱלֹהִים . To be sure, He was superior, but the point being made was that it was fallacious on their part to assume that Yahweh did not have divine "offspring". Moreover, by virtue of the context of this quotation, coming as it did on the heels of Jesus' claim to be equal with the Father, Jesus was in effect saying, "My Father has many divine sons – Psalm 82:6 testifies to this. Yet I am unique with respect to the sons of God. I am in fact above them, and am qualitatively different from them as the μονογενῆς son of God." Arguing that Psalm 82:6 refers to human judges robs Jesus of a very pointed claim to deity.

The final objection to the reality of the divine council and its אֱלֹהִים are passages like those in Isaiah that denounce idols and forcefully contend there are no other gods besides Yahweh.[104] In fact, such claims are also present in Deuteronomy 32 itself (verses 15-18, 21). Since the Scriptures do not contradict themselves, the presence of such passages, particularly when juxtaposed with references to divine beings in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and 43, do not mitigate against the existence of the אֱלֹהִים , but actually assumes their reality to make the point of the comparison. Nevertheless, how are these statements to be reconciled with the reality of the divine council?

It could simply be argued that what these passages assert is that there is no other *Deity* than Yahweh. He is the only true God; all the other אֱלֹהִים have contingent existence and power, were created, and are not omnipotent nor omniscient. One could also argue that what is being proffered in such texts is not the notion that the other "gods" don't exist, but merely that they are powerless to act. By definition this requires distinction. Without proof that the prophets recognized the reality of the divine council and had this distinction in mind, though, this answer would lack force. We have already

---

[102] See footnote 47 for this translation.

[103] The above text is that which many scholars presume to be the source of the New Testament notion that the law was delivered by angels (Acts 7:38,53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Unfortunately, there is no direct reference to the law here either, and the LXX version of the verse, while containing reference to the law, lacks mention of angelic beings! The problem with finding the Old Testament antecedent for this idea is complex, involving morphological, grammatical, and textual difficulties. This author knows of no evangelical text-critical solution in print, but has attempted one (Michael S. Heiser, "Mount Sinai Which is in Arabia," unpublished paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Orlando, FL, November 21, 1998).

[104] Cf. Isaiah 40:18–20; 41:5–7; 44:9–20; 46:5–7.

noted the presence of the divine council in Jeremiah (23:18, 22). Fortunately, the book of Isaiah also has several passages that point to the divine council, one of which (like Deuteronomy 32) is actually located within a passage denouncing idols. We have already noted Isaiah 6 and 24:21, the latter of which makes clear the fact that there are powers in heaven besides Yahweh - but there are other texts as well.

For example, in Isaiah 40:12-26 the prophet mocks the idols and their feebleness in comparison to Yahweh, but then greets his readers with the following (emphasis mine):

> 25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.
> 26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: **Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name**. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

The starry host which are named by Yahweh calls to remembrance the "stars of God" of Isaiah 14:13 and Deuteronomy 4:19 (see discussion below). Additionally, the phrases, "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" draw one's attention to the common, "Who is like Yahweh?" phraseology, so often used to compare the God of Israel directly to the divine beings of the pagan pantheons.[105] It is indeed striking that, just after asking what heavenly being compares to Him, Yahweh answers His own question that He is the Creator of the other אֱלֹהִים , and they are therefore subject to him and "line up at his command" – not one of them dare miss His roll call! It would be nonsensical to have Yahweh claim to have created and to command entities that do not in fact exist. The juxtaposition of passages like this one and the proclamation that there is only one true God demonstrates that the reality of a divine council of plural אֱלֹהִים is in no way incompatible with monotheism, provided that it is articulated in ancient semitic terms.

By way of other instances of the divine council in Isaiah, there are a several passages where Yahweh issues commands *in the plural imperative form* to an unseen audience – an audience which is none other than His council.[106] One familiar example is Isaiah 40:1-2:

> 1 Comfort, comfort (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ) my people, says your God.
> 2 Speak (דַּבְּרוּ) tenderly to Jerusalem and cry (קִרְאוּ) to her

Some have sought to interpret the above plural imperatives in ways that make "my people" a vocative, but this can be ruled out by several grammatical considerations.[107] "My people" is instead the object of these imperatives. This conclusion is valid for more than strictly grammatical reasons, however. Yahweh issuing commands in the plural

---

[105] Cf. Exod. 15:11; Deut. 33:26; I Kings 8:23; Psalm 89:7–8; 113:5, for example.

[106] Frank M. Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," 274-277; Christopher R. Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109:2 (1990): 229-247.

[107] Seitz, pp. 229-230. See also John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), textual note 1.a, 77.

imperative is in fact a prevalent component of the divine council genre in the Hebrew Bible.[108]

The Divine Council as an Old Testament Theological Concept and Deuteronomy 32:8

Old Testament passages and comparative linguistic data show that the Hebrew Bible contains a concept of a divine assembly which is undeniably analogous to that at Ugarit (not to mention other ancient near eastern civilizations). Consequently, there is no theological need to opt for the MT "sons of Israel" reading over the "sons of God" reading attested in the LXX and 4QDeut^{q} and 4QDeut^{j}. In fact, the "sons of God" reading makes much better sense in light of the biblical history and the Old Testament theology, especially that of Deuteronomy. The same cannot be said for the MT reading. A brief overview of how well both readings "fit" into the scope of Old Testament theology will serve to illustrate this.

The Nations Given Up to the Fallen Divine Beings

As noted at the beginning of our discussion, accepting the MT in Deuteronomy 32:8 ("he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel") along with the correlation of that verse with Genesis 10-11 results in logical problems. As Tigay notes:

> This reading raises a number of difficulties. Why would God base the number of nations on the number of Israelites? . . . Why would He have based the division on their number at the time they went to Egypt, an event not mentioned in the poem? In addition, verse 9, which states that God's portion was Israel, implies a contrast: Israel was God's share while the other peoples were somebody else's share, but verse 8 fails to note whose share they were.[109]

In other words, it makes little sense for God to have based the number of geographical regions on the earth shortly after He dispersed the nations at Babel on the family size of Israel, especially since there was no Jewish race at the time. This problem is compounded (and so also the difficulty with accepting MT) when one considers Deuteronomy 32:9 in light of the MT reading. What logical correlation is the writer making when he says in verse 8 that God "set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel" and then makes the concluding observation in verse 9 that "for the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance"? Certainly the wording suggests a *contrast* between verses 8 and 9 - but what is contrastive about saying God divided the earth into seventy units since there were seventy sons of Israel and then adding that Israel was His own? Once the MT is abandoned, however, the piont of the contrast becomes dramatically clear.

The statement in Deuteronomy 32:9 that "the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance" (NIV) provides the key for understanding the contrast being set

---

[108] Ibid., 232ff. See also Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 216–26.

[109] Ibid., 302.

up between verse 8 and 9. Since verse nine clearly presents the nation Jacob/Israel as*being taken* (חלק) as an allotted inheritance (נחלה - note the wordplay on both counts with the Hiphil verb in verse 8) by the sovereign divine personage (Yahweh), the parallelism of MT's verse 9 would require the "nations" of verse 8 be given as an inheritance as well.[110] Hence the point of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is *not* merely that God created seventy territorial units after Babel, but that each of these units *was given* as an inheritance. The question is, to whom were the nations given? This is left unstated in Deut. 32:8a, but 32:8b, the focus of our controversy, provides the answer. The parallel only makes sense if the original reading of 8b included a reference to other divine beings to whom the other nations could be given: the "sons of God." The point of the Deut. 32:8-9 is that, sometime after God separated the people of the earth at Babel, and established where on the earth they were to be located, he assigned each of the 70 nations to the fallen sons of God (who were also 70 in number).[111] After observing humanity's rebellion prior to the flood, and then again in the Babel incident, God decided to desist in His efforts to work directly with humanity. In an action reminiscent of Romans 1, God "gave humanity up" to their persistent resistance to obeying Him. God's new approach would be to create *ex nihilo* a unique nation to Himself (Israel), which nation He originates in the very next chapter of Genesis with the call of Abraham. Hence each pagan nation was overseen by a divine being of inferior status to Yahweh, but Israel would be tended to by the "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:17).

According to Deuteronomy 4:19, this "giving up" of the nations was a punitive act. Rather than electing them to a special relationship to Himself, God gave these nations up to the idolatry (of which babel was symptomatic) in which they willfully persisted. Consider the two passages in relation to one another:

> **Deut. 4:19** (RSV) **-** And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.[112]
>
> **Deut. 32:8-9** (with LXX and DSS) – (8) When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the

---

110 בהנחל in Deut. 32:8 is pointed as a Hiphil infinitive absolute, but should probably be understood as a defective spelling of the infinitive construct: בְּהַנְחֵל (Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 154). This is a minor consideration, for the real point is the relationship of the object of this Hiphil verbal form, the nations. As Paul Sanders notes (154), the Hiphil of the verb נחל can be "connected both with an *accusativus personae* (the inheriting person) or with an *accusativus rei* (the object inherited by this person). Those who embrace the MT reading for the verse would opt for the former, which would imply that the nations of the earth inherited a certain amount of property at God's hand, namely their own lands. Hence the NIV's translation, "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance." Those who agree with this author would see the latter syntactical choice as more sensible: that the nations themselves *were given* as an inheritance (rendered, "when the Most High gave the nations as an inheritance"). For examples of the latter choice found elsehwere, see Deut. 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Josh. 1:6; I Sam. 2:8; Zech. 8:12; and Prov. 8:21 for other examples.

111 Recall again that at Ugarit there were seventy sons of El (*KTU* 1.4:VI.46). I refer to the sons of God as "fallen" here in light of Genesis 6 as well as Deut. 4:19.

112 Noted the same verb in Deut. 4:19 as in 32:8, "allotted" (חלק).

> peoples according to the number of the sons of God. (9) For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.

As Jeffrey Tigay notes in reference to these passages:

> [These passages] seem to reflect a biblical view that . . . as punishment for man's repeated spurning of His authority in primordial times (Gen. 3-11), God deprived mankind at large of true knowledge of Himself and ordained that it should worship idols and subordinate celestial beings . . . He selected Abraham and his descendants as the objects of His personal attention to create a model nation.[113]

The Divine Council and Israelite Monotheism

If other divine beings do not actually exist, texts like these below are completely eviscerated of meaning:

> Psalm 89:6,7 - "For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the sons of the gods (בני אלים)? In the council of the holy ones (בסוד־קדשים) God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him."

> Psalm 29:1 - "A psalm of David. Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the gods (בני אלים), ascribe to the LORD glory and strength."

How hollow it would be to have the psalmist extolling the greatness of God by comparing Him to beings which do not exist, and to in turn ask these fabricated divinities ascribe glory and strength to the Lord!

The Scripture writers did in fact assume the existence of these divine beings. But how can it be maintained that the Hebrew Bible espouses monotheism when its authors continued to use the terms אֱלֹהִים and אֵלִים and "the sons of" אֱלֹהִים and אֵלִים in reference to non-human figures? The solution to this apparent impasse is relatively simple, but requires an adjustment in both the way we define "GOD" and how we understand the data of the Hebrew Bible. Making such adaptations will clarify just how unique Israel's religion was in its ancient near eastern context.

First, hesitation to embrace the details of the divine council stems from habitually viewing the Old Testament through western eyes. We as western Christians have been so conditioned by our own conception of the word "GOD" - a being that is omnipotent, self-existent, omniscient, omnipresent, and possessing ultimate creative power - that we

---

[113] Jeffrey Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 435. The same idea contained in these verses also seems the point of Zephaniah 3:9 - "For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent." David was certainly familiar with this idea, as his incensed tone in I Sam. 26:19 indicates: "Now let my lord the king listen to his servant's words. If the LORD has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, men have done it, may they be cursed before the LORD! They have now driven me from my share in the LORD's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods'."

assume the unreality of any entity referred to by the same word. Would the ancient semitic mind have defined "GOD" as we do, and then made the same assumption? We have already seen that even Isaiah, famous for his diatribes against pagan worship, uses language and imagery analogous to depictions of the divine council in other places of the Hebrew Bible and outside the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah simultaneously affirmed the existence of other divine beings and the one true deity of Israel. We must do the same.

Unfortunately, we have labeled the ancient near eastern religious systems "polytheistic," and have defined that term in such a way as to assert that *the ancient Semites* believed that *all* non-human entities bearing the label אֱלֹהִים must have been omnipotent, self-existent, omniscient, omnipresent, and possessing ultimate creative power. Hence it is we who have concocted the notion that the ancients *could not* have understood the various אֱלֹהִים as existing in a hierarchy where the attributes of the אֱלֹהִים *differed* – and where the attributes we think of as defining deity were held by only *one* of the אֱלֹהִים . To be sure, it was due to the gracious revelation of God to Israel through Moses that enabled them to sort this out – and we know they did sort it out precisely because of the internal and external evidence alluded to above.

The authors of the Hebrew Bible simultaneously affirm the existence of plural אֱלֹהִים while asking in a number of places, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?," *precisely because they already knew* that Yahweh was an אֱלֹהִים , but only one אֱלֹהִים was omnipotent, pre-existent, and omniscient.[114] Put another way, Israelite religion providentially extended beyond the lexeme אֱלֹהִים by virtue of Israel's actual historical contact with Yahweh. It was no conundrum for the people of Israel to affirm that the word אֱלֹהִים in their language described actual beings that Yahweh had *created* who were members of His council, while knowing that none of these אֱלֹהִים were truly comparable to Yahweh. In fact, the Hebrew Bible *could not deny* the existence of other אֱלֹהִים since Yahweh *had* created them! Their understanding of what defined deity (as opposed to divinity - "god-likeness") was derived from their experience of Yahweh's power over all the other nations. Whereas other ancient near eastern religions showed only glimpses of the monotheistic idea,[115] Israel alone achieved consistency in the concept. To subsequently use our conception of God, which derives from reading the record of the exploits of Yahweh, *against* the ancient understanding of multiple אֱלֹהִים to allegedly avoid a conclusion that would not have even entered the minds of the Israelites is illegitimate. There is no need to create wholly interpretive, camouflaged

---

[114] Exodus 15:11. See also Ps. 86:8; 138:1

[115] As discussions of the pantheons and the phenomenon of the divine council demonstrate, all ancient near eastern religions religions divided their gods into "non-council" and "council" groups, the latter forming the "upper tier" of those beings who inhabited the heavenly realms. The fact that there exists evidence in Mesopotamia for monotheistic ideology, and that at least one Egyptian "theology" presents one god as supreme creator of all the others testifies to the facts that we must not superimpose the exclusivity of the attributes of Yahweh to other אֱלֹהִים , nor should we assume the ancients were incapable of the same distinction. With respect to Mesopotamia in this regard, see J. Hehn, *Die Biblische und die babylonische Gottesidee* (1913) and B. Baentsch, *Altorientalischer und israelitischer Monotheismus* (1906). For Egypt, I have in mind the Memphite theology.

translations,[116] or to interpret אֱלֹהִים as human "judges," an approach that requires either paying lip service to an Old Testament hermeneutic that incorporates comparative philology or jettisons the analogous material altogether.

Second, it is hardly necessary to balk at affirming the reality of the divine council since the Hebrew Bible's presentation of the concept may be genuinely distinguished from the pagan understanding. Aside from uncontradicted assertions that none of the אֱלֹהִים were comparable to Yahweh, the description of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible departs from that of other ancient near eastern religions in several important ways.

For example, Yahweh is transparently depicted as the sole Deity credited with bringing all that exists into being. He was unassisted in His creative acts.[117] None of the other divine beings rendered Him aid in this endeavour. The Hebrew Bible strips the אֱלֹהִים of this deed, reserving credit for the creation for only Yahweh. An equally radical departure from the ancient pagan mind is the absence of any hint of theogony in the Old Testament. Yahweh produced the אֱלֹהִים and everything else without a consort. Yahweh's "fatherhood" of the אֱלֹהִים can only be spoken of in formal terms. Lastly, the members of the council, contrary to ancient near eastern religions, cannot be viewed as genuine rivals to the Most High. Yahweh need not battle the divine beings to maintain His position as leader of the council and hence the cosmos. There are no mighty deeds ascribed to any other than Yahweh. The אֱלֹהִים are obviously inferior. Yahweh is unchallenged and, in fact, unchallengeable.

Conclusion

The chief purpose of this article was to respond to the concern that accepting the LXX and Qumran evidence for the "sons of God" reading in Deuteronomy 32:8 requires seeing Israelite religion as polytheistic. In an effort to demonstrate that this conclusion is unfounded, two assertions were offered and defended: (1) the textual evidence favors the "sons of God" reading, particularly when common misunderstandings of text-critical history and methodology utilized to favor MT are corrected; and (2) the concept of the divine council, common to ancient semitic religion, is contained in the Hebrew Bible and constitutes the theological backdrop for Deuteronomy 32:8-9. In light of the evidence, there exists no textual or theological justification for preferring the MT reading. Deuteronomy 32:8 should read "sons of God," not "sons of Israel."

---

[116] For example, see the NIV at Psalm 29:1 – "A psalm of David. Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones (Hebrew = בְּנֵי אֵלִים), ascribe to the LORD glory and strength."

[117] As the plural cohortatives and pronouns ("let us make man in our image") in Genesis 1:26-27 indicate, the creation of mankind is a decision of the council. It should be noted, however, that the following verb ("so God created . . .") is singular, thereby informing us that only Yahweh/El did the creating – He merely announced His decision to the council and carried it out.