

THE DIVINE COUNCIL

A term used by Hebrew and Semitics scholars for the heavenly host, the pantheon of divine beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos. All ancient Mediterranean cultures had some conception of a divine council. The divine council of Israelite religion, known primarily through the psalms, was distinct in important ways.

1. Textual Evidence

1.1. *The Council of the Gods / God*

Comparison of the Hebrew Bible with other ancient religious texts reveals overlaps between the divine councils of the surrounding nations and Israel's version of the heavenly bureaucracy. The parade example is the literature from Ras Shamra (Ugarit). Translated shortly after their discovery in the 1930s, these tablets contain several phrases describing a council of gods that are conceptually and linguistically parallel to the Hebrew Bible. The Ugaritic council was led by El, the same proper name used in the Hebrew Bible for the God of Israel (e.g., Is 40:18; 43:12).

References to the "council of El" include: *phr ʾilm* ("the assembly of El/ the gods"; *KTU* 1.47:29, 1.118:28, 1.148:9); *phr bn ʾilm* ("the assembly of the sons of El/ the gods"; *KTU* 1.4.III:14); *mphrt bn ʾil* ("the assembly of the sons of El"; *KTU* 1.65:3; cf. 1.40:25, 42); *dr bn ʾil* ("assembly [circle, group] of the sons of El"; *KTU* 1.40:25, 33-34); and *ʿdt ʾilm* ("assembly of El / the gods"; *KTU* 1.15.II: 7, 11). Phoenician texts, such as the Karatepe inscription, also describe a Semitic pantheon: *wkl dr bn ʾlm* ("and all the circle/group of the sons of the gods"; *KAI* 26.III.19; 27.12).

The *dt ʿilm* ("assembly of El / the gods") of Ugaritic texts represents the most precise parallel to the data of the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 82:1 uses the same expression for the council (*dt ʿilm*), along with an indisputably plural use of the word *ʿēlōhîm* ("God, gods"): "God (*ʿēlōhîm*) stands in the council of El/the divine council (*baʿădat-ʿēl*); among the gods (*ʿēlōhîm*) he passes judgment." The second occurrence of *ʿēlōhîm* must be plural due to the preposition "in the midst of." The Trinity cannot be the explanation for this divine plurality, since the psalm goes on to detail how Israel's God charges the other *ʿēlōhîm* with corruption and sentences them to die "like humankind." Psalm 89:5-7 [6-8] places the God of Israel "in the assembly of the holy ones" (*biqhal qēdōšîm*) and then asks "For who in the clouds can be compared to Yahweh? Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God (*bēnê ʿēlîm*), a god greatly feared in the council of the holy ones (*bēsôd qēdōšîm*)?" Psalm 29:1 commands the same sons of God (*bēnê ʿēlîm*) to praise Yahweh and give him due obeisance. These heavenly "sons of God" (*bēnê ʿēlōhîm*, or the *bēnê hāʿēlōhîm*) appear in other biblical texts (Gen 6:2.4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; and Deut 32:8-9, 43 [LXX, Qumran]; Heiser, "Deut 32:8").

Another biblical Hebrew term matching Ugaritic terminology is *dôr*, which often means "generation" but, as with Ugaritic and Phoenician *dr*, may also refer to the "circle" (group) of gods; that is, the divine council (Amos 8:14 [emendation]; Ps 49:20; 84:11).

1.2. The Abode and Meeting Place of the Divine Council

At Ugarit the divine council and its gods met on a cosmic mountain, the place where heaven and earth intersected and where divine decrees were issued. This place was at the "source of the two

rivers" (*mbk nhrm*) in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep" (*qrb ʿapq thmtm*). This well-watered mountain was the place of the "assembled congregation" (*phr mʿd*). El dwelt on this mountain and, with his council, issued divine decrees from the "tents of El" (*dd ʿil*) and his "tent shrine" (*qrs*; *KTU* 1.1.III:23; 1.2.III:5; 1.3.V:20-21; 1.4.IV:22-23; 1.6.I:34-35; 1.17.VI:48). In the Kirta Epic, El and the gods live in "tents" (*ʿahlm*) and "tabernacles" (*mškt*; *KTU* 1.15.3.18-19). The Ugaritic god Baal, the deity who oversaw the council for El (see below) held meetings in the "heights" (*mrym*) of Mount *Šapānu*, apparently located in a range of mountains that included El's own abode. In Baal's palace in *Šapānu* there were "paved bricks" (*lbnt*) that made Baal's house "a house of the clearness of lapis lazuli" (*bht thrm ʿiqn ʿum*).

These descriptions are present in the Hebrew Bible with respect to Israel's God and his council. Yahweh dwells on mountains (Sinai or Zion; e.g., Ex 34:26; 1 Kings 8:10; Ps 48:1-2). The Jerusalem temple is said to be located in the "heights of [*yarkētê*] the north [*šāpôn*]." Zion is the "mount of assembly" (*har mōʿēd*), again located in *yarkētê šāpôn* (Is 14:13). Additionally, Mount Zion is described as a watery habitation (Is 33:20-22; Ezek 47:1-12; Zech 14:8; Joel 3:18 [Hebr., 4:18]). A tradition preserved in Ezekiel 28:13-16 equates the "holy mountain of God" with Eden, the "garden of God." Eden appears in Ezekiel 28:2 as the "seat of the gods" (*mōšāb ʿēlōhîm*). The description of Eden in Gen 2:6-15 refers to the "ground flow" that "watered the entire face of the earth." At Sinai Moses and others saw Yahweh and feasted with him (Ex 24). The description of this banquet includes the observation that under God's feet was a paved construction of "sapphire stone" (*libnat hassappîr*; Ex 24:10), just as with Baal's dwelling. Other striking parallels include Yahweh's frequent presence in the tabernacle (*mîškan*) and Zion as Yahweh's tent (*ʿohel*; cf. Is 33:20; Ps 26:8; 74:7; 1 Chron 9:23).

1.3 The Structure and Bureaucracy of the Divine Council

The council at Ugarit apparently had four tiers (Smith, *Origins*, 41-53). The top tier consisted of El and his wife Athirat (Asherah). The second tier was the domain of their royal family (“sons of El”; “princes”). One member of this second tier served as the vice regent of El, and was, despite being under El’s authority, given the title “most high” (Wyatt, “Titles,” 419). A third tier was for “craftsman deities,” while the lowest tier was reserved for the messengers (*ml’km*), essentially servants or staff. The Ugaritic council is at times described as a court with a prosecutorial figure called the *saṭan* present, whose job was to enforce divine legislation and point out transgression (Handy, “Authorization”).

Evidence for exactly the same structures in the Israelite council is tenuous. Despite the fact that popular Israelite religion may have understood Yahweh as having a wife (Asherah; Hess), it cannot be sustained that the religion of the prophets and biblical writers contained this element or that the idea was permissible. There is also no real evidence for the craftsman tier. However, the role of the *saṭan*, the Accuser, is readily apparent (Job 1:6ff.; 2:1ff.). In the divine council in Israelite religion, Yahweh was the supreme authority over a divine bureaucracy that included a second tier of lesser *’ēlōhîm* (the *bĕnê ’ēlîm*, *bĕnê ’ēlōhîm*, or the *bĕnê hā’ēlōhîm*), and a third tier of *mal’ākîm* (“angels”). In the book of Job some members of the council apparently have a mediatory role with respect to human beings (Job 5:1; 15:8; 16:19-21; cp. Heb 1:14).

The vice regent slot in the Israelite council represents the most significant difference between Israel’s council and all others. In Israelite religion, this position of authority was not filled by another god, but by Yahweh himself in another form. This “hypostasis” of Yahweh was the

same essence as Yahweh but a distinct, second person. This is most plainly seen via the Name theology of the Hebrew Bible and the so-called “Angel of Yahweh” (cf. Ex 23:20-33 for the Angel’s connection to the Name, the essence of Yahweh; Heiser, “Divine Council,” 34-67).

2. Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible and the Divine Council

2.1 Biblical Polytheism?

Many scholars have concluded that the presence of a divine council in the Hebrew Bible means that Israel’s religion was at one time polytheistic (there are many gods) or henotheistic (there are many gods, but one is preferred) and only later evolved to monotheism. Polytheism and monolatrous henotheism both presume “species sameness” among the gods. Henotheism in particular assumes the possibility of a power struggle for supremacy in the council, where the supreme authority could be displaced if another god defeats or outwits him. This does not reflect orthodox Israelite religious belief. The biblical data indicate that orthodox Israelite religion never considered Yahweh as one among equals or near equals. The biblical writers refer exclusively to Yahweh as “the God” (*hā’ēlōhîm*; I Kings 18:39) when that term occurs with respect to a singular entity. Yahweh is the “true God” (*’ēlōhîm ’ēmet*; Jer 10:10). The assertion points to the belief that, while Yahweh was an *’ēlōhîm*, he was qualitatively unique among the *’ēlōhîm*. The primary distinguishing characteristic of Yahweh from any other *’ēlōhîm* was his pre-existence and creation of all things (Is 45:18), including the “host of heaven” (Ps 33:6; 148:1-5; cf. Neh 9:6), language that at times clearly refers to the other divine beings (cf. Job 38:7-8; 1 Kings 22; Is 14:13; cp. Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9, 43 [LXX, Qumran]; with Deut 17:3;

29:25; 32:17). Yahweh's utter uniqueness to all other *ʿēlōhîm* is monotheism on ancient Semitic terms, and orthodox Israelite religion reflects this at all stages.

2.2 Plural *ʿēlōhîm* as *Human Beings*?

Many scholars understand the plural *ʿēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 and 89 as human rulers, namely the elders of Israel, no doubt due to the specter of polytheism. This position is highly problematic. If these *ʿēlōhîm* are humans, why are they sentenced to die “like humans”? A clear contrast is intended by both the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text (Prinsloo; Handy, “Sounds”). At no time in the Hebrew Bible did Israel's elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations. There is no scriptural basis for the idea that God presides over a council of humans that governs the nations of the earth. In fact, the situation is exactly the opposite—Israel was *separated* from the nations to be God's own possession, while the other nations were abandoned by Yahweh to the rule of other *ʿēlōhîm* in the wake of the incident at Babel (Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9 [LXX, Qumran]; cp. Dan 10:13, 20; Heiser, “Deut 32:8”). It is also difficult to see how the corrupt decisions of a group of humans would shake the foundations of the earth (Ps 82:5). Furthermore, it is clear from Psalm 89 that the “sons of God” (*bēnê ʿēlîm*) in “the council of the holy ones” (*bēsôd qēdōšîm*) meet “in the clouds” (*baššahaq*; Ps 89:6 [Hebr. 89:7]).

The lesser *ʿēlōhîm* are not merely idols. Deuteronomy 32:17, when understood against a broad view of Deuteronomy's statements about gods and idols, nullifies this explanation: “They sacrificed to demons (*šēdîm*) who are not God (*ʿēlōah*; a singular noun), to gods (*ʿēlōhîm*) they did not know; new gods that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not revered.”

If the lesser *ʿēlōhîm* are demons, their existence cannot be denied. One psalmist (Ps 97:7), while mocking the lifeless idols, demands that the lesser *ʿēlōhîm* worship Yahweh, a puzzling command if there were no such entities.

2.3 “No Other Gods Beside Me”?

How is one to reconcile Israel’s divine council with statements in the Hebrew Bible that “there is none beside” Yahweh? Such statements are taken by critical scholars as evidence that Israel had shed its polytheism, and by others as necessitating the strained interpretations noted above.

Neither view can be sustained in light of the references to plural *ʿēlōhîm* and *ʿēlîm* in Second Temple period Jewish texts (roughly 185 in the Qumran material alone; Heiser, “Divine Council,” 189-210) and the Jewish belief in “Two Powers” in heaven during that same period (Segal). Analysis of the Hebrew text demonstrates that several of the most common phrases in the Hebrew Bible allegedly used for denying the existence of other gods (e.g., Deut 4:35, 39; 32:12, 39) appear in passages that affirm the existence of other gods (Deut 4, 32). The result is that these phrases express the incomparability of Yahweh among the other *ʿēlōhîm*, not that the biblical writer contradicts himself, or that he is in the process of discovering monotheism. The situation is the same in Isaiah 40-66. Isaiah 40:1-8 is familiar to scholars (via the plural imperatives in 40:1-2) as a divine council text (Cross, Seitz). Isaiah 40:22-26 affirms the ancient Israelite worldview that described heavenly beings with heavenly host terminology (Heiser, “Divine Council,” 114-118). That Isaiah’s “denial statements” should be understood as statements of incomparability, not as rejections of the existence of other gods, is made clear in

Isaiah 47:8, 10, where Babylon boldly claims, “I am, and there is none else beside me.” The claim is not that Babylon is the only city in the world, but that she has no rival.

Some would argue that the descriptions of a divine council are merely metaphoric. Metaphoric language, however, is not based on what a writer’s view of reality excludes. Rather, the metaphor is a means of framing and categorizing something that *is* part of a writer’s worldview. When the biblical writer asserts, “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods (*’ēlōhîm*, *’ēlîm*; Deut 10:17; Ex 15:11)?” these statements reflect a sincere belief and are neither dishonest nor hollow. Comparing Yahweh to the ancient equivalent of an imaginary or fictional character cheapens the praise. The Psalms contain many exclamations of the incomparability of Yahweh to the other gods (Ps 86:8, 95:3; 96:4; 135:5; 136:2). David (Ps 138:1) proclaims that he will sing the praise of the God of Israel “before the gods” (*neged ’ēlōhîm*), a declaration that makes little sense if lesser *’ēlōhîm* did not exist.

3. The Divine Council, Jewish Binitarianism, and New Testament Christology

Numerous descriptions and epithets of Ugaritic El and Baal are attributed to Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible (Day, 13-127; Smith, “Early History,” 32-107). This was done for polemic reasons to challenge the authority of El and Baal. For the Israelite, high sovereignty and chief administration of the cosmos was conducted only by Yahweh. Nevertheless, Israel’s own divine council had a bureaucratic hierarchy, and that order is consistently described in terms of Yahweh being *both* the high Sovereign and the vice regent. Orthodox Israelite religion instead had Yahweh as sovereign and a second person who was Yahweh’s mediating essence as the vice

regent of the council. This structure reflected Israel's belief in Yahweh's ontological uniqueness as creator of all things, including the other *'ēlōhîm* of the council. The notion of two distinct deities at the top of the hierarchy was unthinkable to Israel.

This religious structure is the backdrop to the ancient Jewish acceptance of two powers in heaven (Segal). Since both powers were believed to be good, the belief does not reflect Zoroastrian influence. The belief in two powers in heaven was a contributing factor in the advent of what scholars have termed "binitarian monotheism" in Second Temple period Judaism (Hurtado, "Binitarian"), which in turn contributes to our understanding of the advent of New Testament Christology. This contextualizes the description of Jesus as the *monogenēs* ("unique"; Grudem, 1233ff.) son of God in the New Testament. Since the Hebrew Bible is clear that there are other sons of God (*bēnê [ha]'ēlōhîm*), New Testament writers clarify that Jesus, as the same essence as the Father, is unique among all heavenly sons of God.

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