

“The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible”

Chapter 2 of:

VISIONS OF THE DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The divine council in the Hebrew Bible is a symbolic ruling body consisting of God as the supreme monarch and various supernatural attendants.

According to Patrick Miller, the divine council is one of the central cosmological symbols in the Hebrew Bible. That is, it is one of the Bible's ways of describing how God maintains order in the the Creation. Working through innumerable hosts of angelic servants, God creates and rules the physical universe, as well as the world of men.

In his position as head of the council, God holds three primary offices: King, Judge, and Warrior. He is absolute ruler over all. He makes judicial decisions about the activities of its occupants. And he initiates punitive actions against those forces (divine or human) which cause chaos and disorder (i.e. sin), in order to restore *tsedaqah* (righteousness) and *shalom* (wholeness, peace). His obedient angels serve him in each of his corresponding offices. In his royal throne-room, they praise their King and act as his official counsellors, courtiers, and messengers. As members of the court, they act as witnesses, investigating detectives, bailiffs, and perhaps fellow judges. As members of the Warrior's vast army, they wage war on evil beings.

The existence of the divine council is witnessed to by various literary genres of the Hebrew Bible. It is mentioned in historical, narrative and poetic passages, prophetic visions, Temple liturgy, apocalyptic visions. It also transcends the historical time-line, from the earliest primeval history to the final eschatological frontier. The concept and imagery of the divine council is thus woven throughout the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible, a few select men gain access to the divine council. These visitors are the prophets. During their visionary entry into working sessions of the royal throneroom, they overhear what the King and his counsellors decide to do regarding specific human situations. Such visits or "throne visions" are for the purpose of giving the prophet a message to announce to his people. The visions also authenticate the messenger, because he alone "has stood in the council of YHVH" (Jer 23:18). The throne visions became a kind of "theological genre" through which the visionaries/writers conveyed their convictions about the status of a particular agent of divine redemption. These agents, when once seen in the heavenly throneroom (if not

seated on the throne by God himself), demand attention from the community of believing Israel.

In the canonical throne visions, we read descriptions of specific agents at the center of council sessions. The high priest Joshua is inaugurated as authority over the post-Exilic Restoration Community. He is opposed by a prosecuting attorney named “the adversary” (יִצְחָק) and defended by YHVH’s personal angel or representative (מַלְאָכִי). And in the last throne vision, a mysterious being with human form (בֶּן אָדָם) receives authority from God to rule the world.

Does this important cosmological symbolic concept and imagery continue to be important among post-biblical Jews?

The central concern of this paper is to show that divine councils were common in the ANE prior to Israel’s historical emergence; to sketch out the basic elements and evidences of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and show the unique features in the relation to foreign pantheons; to analyze the use of those elements with the throne visions or working sessions of the council; and to suggest that the concept imagery and concept continued into post-biblical (Early) Judaism, including the New Testament.

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*Chapter 2***The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible**

Numerous biblical texts testify to the belief in a heavenly council consisting of YHVH the King and his staff.¹ Patrick Miller says the council imagery is in fact “one of the central cosmological symbols of the Old Testament.”² The imagery expresses how the biblical writers understood the “machinery and systems” of the universe. Similar to the Mesopotamian view in which an assembly of gods ruled the cosmic state, the council of YHVH in the Hebrew Bible is responsible for maintaining order in creation at large, but especially order on earth and among Israel. Significant differences exist, however, between the biblical understanding of YHVH’s council and those of other Near Eastern societies. These distinctions will be discussed later.

References to God’s royal throneroom and his entourage of heavenly servants occur in all three portions of Hebrew Scripture (Law, Prophets, Writings); in all major literary genres, including narrative (Exod 24:9-10; Job 1:6-12), historical (1 Kgs 22:19-23), prophetic (Isa 6; Jer 23:18-22), poetic (Job 15:7-8; 33:23), liturgical (Ps 89:5-7; 103:19-22), wisdom (Job 15:8), and visionary (Ezek 1, 10; Zech 3:1-5); and in the earliest and latest dated materials.³ It is also found in materials spanning all of time, from the

¹ Among the most useful studies on the divine council are: B. W. Anderson, “Hosts, Hosts of Heaven,” *IDB* 2.654-56; G. Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *ZAW* 76 (1964): 22-47; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic (Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel)* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 177-190; P. D. Miller, “The Divine World and the Human World” (chap. 1), in *Genesis 1-11 (Studies in Structure & Theme)* (JSOT Sup 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 9-26; idem, “The Sovereignty of God,” in *The Hermeneutical Quest* (ed. D. Miller; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), 129-44; E. T. Mullen, Jr. *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Chico: Scholars Press, 1980); D. Neiman, “Council, Heavenly,” *IDBSup* 187-88; M. E. Polley, “Hebrew Prophecy Within the Council of Yahweh, Examined in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting,” in *Scripture in Context (Essays on the Comparative Method)* (ed. C. Evans, W. Hallo, J. White; PTM 34; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980), 141-56; H. W. Robinson, “The Council of Yahweh,” *JTS* 45 (1944): 151-57; R. N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah xl 13-14 (A Study of the Sources of the Theology of Deutero-Isaiah)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), 39-53; G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1950), 30-41. **[List of source Abbreviations follows this chapter.]**

² P. D. Miller, “Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol,” *Hor* 9 (1987): 54.

³ “This concept of a Divine Assembly appears in the earliest, as well as the latest,

primeval moments of creation (Gen 1:26; Job 38:7) to the eschatological arrival of God's kingdom (Dan 7:9-14).

It is important to see how deeply embedded this imagery and concept are in the various strata of the Hebrew Bible. It is also important to note that the concept of a heavenly council did not threaten the position of YHVH as "God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut 10:17), even in those portions of the Bible where monotheism is so very strongly emphasized (e.g. Deut 6:4; Isa 43-46). As Th. Vriezen noted: "The conception of a host of angels or heavenly beings surrounding Yahweh is always present in Israel. . . . People could not conceive Yahweh in another fashion. . . . Far from clashing with monotheism this conception lays the greatest stress on the Majesty of Yahweh. Yahweh is a unique God, but He is not alone."⁴

The council imagery served a vital polemical function by providing Israel a way of asserting the superior majesty and authority of her God over the "demons" and "no-gods" (Deut 32:17) worshiped as deities by her neighbors. Yet the council idea was not merely a theological construct developed solely for apologetics: it was a living element of Israel's religious system. Evidence for this "real" belief can be seen in various texts.

**God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment . . .
I say, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you." (Ps 82:1, 6) ⁵**

Your wonders, O LORD, are praised by the heavens,

literature of the Old Testament," G. E. Wright (*The Old Testament*, 33). Council imagery exists in such early poems as: Exod 15:11a ("Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? [*elim*]"); Deut 33:2 LXX, Sam, Syr ("With him were myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own"); Judg 5:20 ("The stars fought from heaven"), and v. 23 ("Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD"); Ps 29:1 ("Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength"). The council is also found in late works: Neh 9:6 ("You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host . . . To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you"); Dan 11:36 ("The king . . . shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods [*el elim*]"). On the dating of most of these, see Mullen, *Assembly of the Gods*, 188 n. 128; D. N. Freedman, "Who is Like Thee Among the Gods? The Religion of Early Israel," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (FS: F. M. Cross; ed., P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 315.

⁴ Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (2d ed.; Newton, MA: Ch. Branford, 1970), 327, 328.

⁵ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989). Other texts may be used and are listed in the "Abbreviation" pages.

Your faithfulness, too, in the assembly of holy beings.
 For who in the skies can equal the LORD,
 Can compare with the LORD among the divine beings,
 A God greatly dreaded in the council of holy beings,
 Held in awe by all around Him? (Ps 89:5-8, NJV)

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
 and his kingdom rules over all.
 Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
 you mighty ones who do his bidding,
 obedient to his spoken word.
 Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
 his ministers that do his will. (Ps 103:19-21) ⁶

Names of the Council

The gatherings of God's servants have several titles: מוֹעֵד ("mount of assembly" — Isa 14:13, a mythological allusion ⁷); מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים ("camp of God" — Gen 32:2); מְשֻׁלַּחַת ("company" [of destroying angels] — Ps 78:49); סוּד-אֱלֹהִים ⁸ ("council of God" — Job 15:8, 29:4); סוּד-יְהוָה ("council of YHWH" — Jer 23:18, 22); סוּד-קְדוֹשִׁים ("council of holy ones" — Ps 89:7); עֲדַת-אֱלֹהִים ("congregation of God" — Ps 82:1); and קְהַל-קְדוֹשִׁים ("assembly of holy ones" — Ps 89:6). Each of these terms, except for the Aramaic כְּתִיבָא (court, Dan 7:10, 26), is also used in the HB for Israel's human gatherings, whether the

⁶ This psalm clearly associates heavenly beings with the administration of YHWH's kingdom. The Enthronement Psalms (Pss 24, 29, 47, 68, 89, 93, 96-99) emphasize YHWH as king enthroned in heaven, although few mention his staff. On this subject see W. O. E. Oesterly, "The Kingship of Yahweh," *The Psalms* (2 vols.; London: SPCK, 1939), 1.44-55; J. Gray, "The Reign of God in the Psalms," *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 39-116.

⁷ "The old mythological ideas of the god dwelling or of the gods meeting in assembly in the recesses of (Mount) Zaphon . . . had been transferred to Zion as the divine, holy mountain. . . . For the loyal Yahwist in Jerusalem, the ultimate arrogance would have been for the Assyrian ruler to claim the right to sit (like the Davidic king?) in the council of God, in the recesses of Zaphon (Mt. Zion)," J. Hayes and S. Irvine, *Isaiah the Eighth Century Prophet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 233. Some scholars think the noun דֹּר, usually translated "generation," may refer to a mythological divine assembly in Amos 8:14: "As your god lives, O Dan . . . As the דֹּר of Beer-sheba lives" (Mullen, *Assembly of the Gods*, 118 n. 16). But see J. Hayes for other explanations (*Amos, the Eighth Century Prophet* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1988], 214-215).

⁸ The word *sod* means both council and counsel. (1) It is a circle of familiar friends, the place of confidential speech, the intimate fellowship of God [Gen 49:6; Ps 25:14, 55:15 (Eng 14), 89:7 (Eng 8); Prov 3:32; Job 29:4]. (2) It also means the secrets or decisions arising from such conversations [Ps 83:3 (Eng 4), Prov 11:13, 15:22]. Prophets stand in the *sod of YHWH* (Jer 23:18, 22) and are commissioned to announce the *sod* they overhear (Amos 3:7; Job 15:8). See Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor*, 51-52.

purposes are religious, military, or simply communal (having fellowship and obtaining counsel).

Names of Council Members

The heavenly beings and servants of YHVH have several descriptive titles. This variety of terminology suggests that the constituency of the council held considerable interest for the Israelites. The reality of God's court on high apparently was a widely held assumption. Many names, in fact, occur in the book of Psalms, a collection that reflects *popular* theological perceptions. Several names also appear in Job, a book reflecting the perceptions of the "Wisdom School." There, the names especially relate to judicial functions, a major concern in the book. Overall, the great variety of terms for the council members might also indicate that the beings do not have regularly prescribed titles at all; the titles change. In other words, as the beings serve different functions they are titled accordingly. For example, a "messenger" could also be a "soldier" in YHVH's army or a "minister" in the temple. Generally, there is no systematizing of the ranks, although the commander of YHVH's army (שַׂר-צְבָא יְהוָה; Jos 5:13-15) and the divine destroyer [מְשַׁחֵת; Exod 12:13; 1 Chr 21:15) have individualized roles.⁹ Following is a representative list of various names for members of YHVH's council.

אַבִּירִים	"mighty ones" — Pss 78:25, 103:20
אֱלֹהִים	"gods/divine beings" — Pss 8:6 (Eng 5), 82:1, 86:8, 97:7; 138:1
בְּנֵי (הַ)אֱלֹהִים	"sons of (the true) God" — Gen 6:2 ¹⁰ ; Deut 32:8; ¹¹ Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7; cf. Dan 3:25

⁹ M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 9-10. In Zech 3 and Job 1-2 are seen the individualized roles of the "Messenger of YHVH" and "the Satan" within the divine council (see the discussion below in Chap. 4).

¹⁰ For discussions see R. R. Marrs, "The Sons of God (Genesis 6:1-4)," *ResQ* 23 (1980): 218-24 and D. J. A. Clines, "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Genesis 6:1-4) in the Context of the 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1-11)," *JSOT* 13 (1979): 33-46.

¹¹ The MT of Deut 32:8c reads: "According to the number of sons of *Israel*." The LXX and Qumran appear to have a better reading: "According to the number of the sons of *God*" (so NEB, RSV, NIV margin; the NRSV reads: "sons of the gods").

בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים ¹²	“sons of God/gods” — Pss 29:1, 89:6
בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן	“sons of the Most High” — Ps 82:6
גְּבוּרִים	“warriors” — Deut 33:2b-3; Zech 14:5; Joel 4:11 (Eng 3:11); Ps 68:17; 103:19-20
גִּבְרֵי כֹחַ	“mighty ones” — Isa 13:3
גְּדוּדִים	“troops” — Job 19:12, 25:3
חֹבְבִים	“guardians (of the people)” — Deut 33:3 ¹³
חַיּוֹת	“living creatures” — Ezek 1:5, 13-22
חַיִל	“host” — Dan 4:32 (Eng 35)
כְּרוּבִים	“cherubim” — Gen 3:24; Exod 25:18-22; Ezek 10:1-20
מוֹכֵיחַ	“umpire/arbitrator” — Job 9:33
מַלְאָךְ	“messenger/angel” — numerous: Gen 19:1; 28:12; 32:2-7; 2 Sam 24:16; Zech 1-5; Pss 8:5, 91:11, 103:20, 148:2
מַלְאָךְ-אֱלֹהִים	“messenger of God” — numerous: Gen 21:17, 31:11; 48:16; Exod 14:19; Jud 13:9; 2 Sam 24:16
מַלְאָךְ-יְהוָה	“messenger of YHWH” — numerous: Gen 16:7-11, 22:11, 24:7, Exod 3:2, 23:20; Num 22:22-35; Jud 2:1, 5:23, 6:11-22, 13:3-21; 2 Kgs 1:3; 19:35; Isa 63:9; Zech 1:9, 3:1-6; Ps 34:8; 1 Chr 21:12-30
מַלְאָךְ מְלִיץ	“intercessor, angel mediator” — Job 33:23 ¹⁴

¹² This may simply be a plural form of בֶּן אֱלֹהִים (son of God) meaning “sons of God”; *GKC* 124q; P. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word, 1983) 242 n. 1b.

¹³ This is an alternate reading proposed by F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman (“The Blessing of Moses,” *JBL* 67 [1948], 193, 199-200).

¹⁴ The word *melitz* alone occurs in Job 16:20 where most versions render it “scorners.” But the context in v. 19 (“My witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high”) suggests *melitz* should be rendered “advocates” (human) (so NJV). The book of Job abounds in legal terminology. See below, p. 88 n.281 for details.

מְשַׁחֵת	“ravager” — Isa 54:16 ¹⁵
מְשָׁרֵת	“minister” — Ps 103:21; 104:4
עֲבָדִים	“servants” — Job 4:18
עֵד	“witness” — Ps 89:38 ¹⁶ (Eng 37); Job 16:19 (or is this God himself?)
עֵיר ¹⁷	“watcher(s)” — Dan 4: 10, 14, 20 (Eng 13, 17, 23)
עַמּוּדֵי שָׁמַיִם	“pillars of heaven” — Job 26:11
צָבָא ¹⁸	“host/army” — Jos 5:14-15; 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 24:21; Jer 19:13; Zeph 1:5; Pss 103:21, 148:2; Neh 9:6
צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם	“host of heaven” — 1 Kg 22:19; Isa 24:21, 34:4; Dan 8:10; Neh 9:6
קְדוּשִׁים	“holy ones” — Deut 33:2-3 ¹⁹ ; Hos 12:1; Zech 14:5; Pss 16:3, 89:5, 7, 8; Prov 9:10?, 30:3?; Job 5:1, 15:15; Dan 8:13
רוּחַ	“spirit” — 1 Kgs 22:21-23; Ps 104:4

¹⁵ Cf. Exod 12:13; Jer 22:71; 1 Chr 21:15 (“destroying angel”). The *msht* was a weapon wielded by Baal (KTU 1.2 I 39); cited by M. S. Smith, *Early History of God*, 113 n. 132.

¹⁶ Ps 89:38 speaks of “an enduring witness in the skies.” For the discussions whether this is an astronomical body, an angelic being, or God himself, see T. Veijola, “The Witness in the Clouds: Ps 89:38,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 413-17.

¹⁷ J. Teixidor has suggested that the term עֵיר (“watcher”) was based on spies who watched over the empire on behalf of the Persian ruler (*JAOS* 87 [1967] 634). Cited by Smith, *Early History of God*, 10, 33 n. 53. See discussion below on pp. 89-90 n. 51-52.

¹⁸ In Ugaritic the noun *saba* means army; in Akkadian the verb means to wage war (KB 790). Both meanings exist in the HB. Some “service” done for God is, however, not military in nature, but occurs in his temple (Num 4:23, 8:24), even by “service-women” (הַצְּבָאוֹת, Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22; cf. Ps 68:11b “great is the company [*tzaba*] of women who proclaim the good tidings”).

¹⁹ For discussion of these “holy ones,” see Cross and Freedman, “The Blessing of Moses,” 198-202.

רָמִים	“those on high” — Job 21:22
שָׁמַיִם	“heavens” — Deut 32:1, 43 (mss); Isa 1:2; Jer 2:12; Pss 19:1 (Eng 2), 50:6 (=97:6), 89:6, 148:4
כּוֹכָבִים שֶׁמֶשׁ יָרִיחַ	“Sun/Moon/Stars” — Jos 10:12b-13a; Jud 5:20; Ps 148:3; Job 38:7
שָׂהָד	“He that vouches for me” — Job 16:19; cf. Gen 31:47
שָׂרִים	“prince(s)” — Jos 5:14, 15; Dan 10:13, 20, 21; 12:1
שֶׁרָפִים	“serafim” — Isa 6:2, 6

The terms for the council members apparently can be grouped according to six broad categories of relationship to YHVH. These groupings reinforce the idea that the beings are not independent divine entities in their own right, but derive their existence solely from the one who created them and commissions them to serve.

A. *Heavenly realm [God is Creator]*

אֱלֹהִים/אֱלִים	gods, divine or supernatural beings
שָׁמַיִם	heavens
צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם	army of the heavens
שֶׁמֶשׁ יָרִיחַ כּוֹכָבִים	sun, moon, stars
עַמּוּדֵי שָׁמַיִם	pillars of heaven
רָמִים	high ones
רוּחוֹת	winds

B. *Familial [God is Father]*

בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים/אֱלִים	sons of (the) God
בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן	sons of the Most High

C. *Regal [God is King]*

מַלְאָךְ	messenger
מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים	messenger (personal presence) of God

מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה	messenger of YHVH
רוּחַ	agent/herald

D. Military [God is Warrior]

אַבִּירִים	mighty ones
גְּבוּרִים	warriors
גְּדוּדִים	troops
חֹבְבִים	guardians
חַיִל	host
מְשַׁחֵת	ravager
צָבָא	army
שָׂרִים	princes

E. Court [God is Judge]

מַלְאָךְ מְלִיץ	messenger of intercession
מְלִיץ	intercessor
מוֹכֵחַ	umpire/arbitrator
עֵד	witness
עֵרֵי	watchers
שֹׁהֵד	witness

F. Zion/Temple/Ark/Throne [God is Lord]

כְּרוּבִים	chariot throne-bearers
מְשָׁרְתִים	ministers
עֲבָדִים	servants
קְדוּשִׁים	holy ones
שָׂרָפִים	fiery (winged) ones

Other Indications of the Council

Plural verbs and pronouns. Other evidence for a heavenly assembly includes the use of plural pronouns and verbs in statements attributed to God. Three of these occur in Genesis 1-11.

Gen 1:26	Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness
Gen 3:22	The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil
Gen 11:7	Come, let us go down

From Philo onward, Jewish commentators generally held that these plurals were used because God was addressing his heavenly court. The early post-Apostolic Fathers (e.g., Barnabas, Justin Martyr) saw the plurals as a reference to the pre-incarnate Jesus and an adumbration of the Trinity. Recent scholars, however, tend to agree with ancient Jewish opinion, believing that the interpretation of the Fathers was anachronistic and that the HB writers “had no such conception in mind.”²⁰ For example, F. M. Cross notes: “In both Ugaritic and biblical literature, the use of the first person plural is characteristic of address in the divine council. The familiar ‘we’ . . . has long been recognized as the plural address used by Yahweh in his council.”²¹ This grammatical form has been variously labelled “the royal we,” “the deliberative we,” “the plural of fullness,” or “the plural of majesty.” Donald Gowan, however, says: “There is no support in the OT for most of the proposed

²⁰ D. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel (A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11)* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 28. Some scholars held this view long before modern studies on ANE councils. For example, a century ago, Franz Delitzsch said that the plurals in Gen 1:26, 3:22, and 11:7 referred to God’s conversations with the angels (*A New Commentary on Genesis* [Vol. 1; tr. S. Taylor; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888] 98-99, 171-72, 351). A little later, A. B. Davidson wrote: “These Elohim, or sons of Elohim, form the council of Jehovah. They surround Him, and minister to Him. He and they are *Elohim*” (*Theology of the O.T.* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1904] 295). For a brief history of interpretation of the plurals in Genesis, see G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 27-28. V. P. Hamilton does not believe Moses was a “trinitarian monotheist,” yet he argues that the “us” of Gen 1:26 represents a “duality” within the Godhead, i.e. God and Spirit. In Gen 3:22, the “us” represents God’s self-deliberation (*Genesis: Chapters 1-17* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 134, 208-09).

²¹ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 187 n. 176. Cf. Asherah’s speech to the Assembly of El: “Let us make (him) king” (*UT* 49:I:20, 26 = CTA 6), and El’s decree to the Assembly: “Our king is Al iyan Ba ‘al; our judge without peer” (*UT* 51:IV:43-44; V:40-41 = CTA 4). Cited by Hamilton, *Genesis*, 209 n. 4; cf. Mullen, *Assembly of the Gods*, 50, 66-67..

explanations.” Rather, he opts for the “consultative we,” reflecting God’s consultations with his spiritual creatures in heaven.²² Franz Delitzsch had used a similar term: “communicative plural.”²³

Courtroom Settings. Plurals, such as those in Genesis, commonly occur in the book of Isaiah. For example, the statement in Isaiah 6:8 (“Whom shall I send, and will go for *us*?”) likely “reflects the idea that God was surrounded by the court made up of his heavenly servants.”²⁴ Similarly, the court room scene in Isaiah 41 contains several plural pronouns:

Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are,
so that we may consider them,
and that we may know their outcome;
or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter,
that we may know that you are gods [elohim]
do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. (vv. 21-23)²⁵

In Isaiah 40:1-8, the second person plural *imperatives* and the reference to various “voices” indicate a heavenly council session, which apparently included the prophet himself.²⁶

²² D. E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel*, 27-28. C. Westermann argues for a “plural of deliberation” (God speaking to himself when deciding something). He does so because he attributes all three Genesis verses to the Priestly writer, and thinks P knew of no such heavenly court and could never have intended an allusion to other divine beings (*Genesis 1-11* [tr. J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984] 144-45). Other critics, however, assign Gen 3:22 and 11:7 to J (Noth) or L (Eissfeldt), so Westerman’s argument is not conclusive. Miller says, “One could hardly argue with much cogency that such a notion would be unknown to P when it is assumed from early to late in the Old Testament. In fact in the later period, at the time the Priestly circle was at work, the imagery of the divine world and the heavenly beings was becoming increasingly articulated and prominent” (*Genesis 1-11*, 12).

²³ *Commentary on Genesis*, 1.171.

²⁴ R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 76.

²⁵ R. N. Whybray sees this passage as a continuation of the “fact-finding” court case that YHVH called at the first of the chapter (41:1-5). Either as a plaintiff or defendant, YHVH calls his witnesses (coastlands and peoples) to hear the testimony of the gods of the nations as they marshal forth their claims of divinity (*Isaiah 40-66* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981] 60, 67-68). Cf. Isa 43:9: “Who among them declared this, and foretold to *us* the former things?”

²⁶ See R. F. Melugin, “The Formation of Isaiah 40-55,” *BZAW* 141 (Berlin: W. de

Verse :1 Comfort [נְחַמוּ], O comfort [נְחַמוּ] my people
 :2 Speak tenderly [דַּבְּרוּ עַל-לֵב] to Jerusalem . . . and cry [וְקְרְאוּ] to her
 :3 A voice cries out
 :6 A voice says
 :6 And I [the prophet?] said ²⁷

When the council gathers for legal purposes, it is typically called into session with an “Address to the Divine Council.”²⁸

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
 For the LORD has spoken. (Isa 1:2) ²⁹

A little later, following detailed specification of the charges brought against the defendant, the Judge then enters the courtroom:

The LORD rises [נָצַב] to argue his case [לָרִיב]
 he stands [עָמַד] to judge the peoples.
 The LORD enters into judgment [לְדַיֵן]
 with the elders and princes of his people. (Isa 3:13-14a) ³⁰

Gruyter, 1976): 83-86; Mullen, *Assembly of the Gods*, 216-17; B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 476-78. See also C. R. Seitz for recent discussion of council imagery in Isaiah 40-66, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 229-47.

²⁷ The MT reads וַאֲמַר (“and he said”), but LXX and 1QIs^a read: “and I said” (so RSV, NIV, NJV margin).

²⁸ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 152. Cf. Ps 29:1: “Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings / Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.”

²⁹ In Micah 6:1-2, the mountains serve as God’s court witnesses. Some scholars think a similar address in Mic 1:2 originally went out to the council, although it now says “Hear, you peoples.” See the discussion in D. R. Hillers, *Micah* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 19 and J. T. Willis, “Some Suggestions on the Interpretation of Micah I, 2,” *VT* 18 (1968): 372-79.

³⁰ The verbs נָצַב and עָמַד can both have forensic nuances (cf. judging scenes in Amos 7:7, 9:1; Isa 6:1, 4). In Mesopotamia the verbs “to stand” (*uzuzzu*) and “to sit” (*uasabu*) are technical terms for participating in the assembly (*puhrum*) (T. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, 401 n. 24). Officers stood in Solomon’s court (1 Kgs 4:5, 7, 27; 5:16; 9:23). The members of the divine council are said to stand in YHWH’s presence (1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:2; Ezek 1:25, 10:2-3; Zech 3:1, 4; Dan 7:10). They may stand in readiness to participate in the legal proceedings, or to execute God’s decisions, or out of reverence for the Judge—or perhaps all three in some cases. Cf. A. Malamat, “Kingship and Council in Israel and Sumer: A Parallel,” *JNES* 22 (1963): 247-53.

Similar imagery appears in Psalm 82, where the defendants are members of the divine council itself:

God has taken his place [בָּנֶצַח] in the divine council [לְעֵדֹת-אֱלֹהִים];
in the midst of the gods [בְּתוֹכֵם] he holds judgment [יִשְׁפֹּט]. (v. 1) ³¹

Summary of Council Activities

A survey of passages mentioning the council members provides a general list of activities in which they engage. These include: (1) praising and worshiping God (Deut 32:43; Isa 6:3; Pss 103:20-22, 148:1-6; Job 38:7; Neh 9:6); (2) serving as ministers (Isa 6: 6-7; Ps 103:21); (3) serving as witnesses, fellow judges, and bailiffs in YHVH's court (Isa 1:2; Ps 82:1-4; Zech 3:3-5); (4) acting as God's throne or chariot (Pss 18:10, 99:1); (5) carrying God's throne (Ezek 1, 10); (6) serving as captains and soldiers in the supernatural army (Jos 5:14-15; 2 Kgs 6:17); (7) interpreting visions (Zech 1:9, 19, 21; Dan 7:15-17, 8:15-19); and (8) serving as shepherds of men or as patron angels of nations (Gen 48:15-16; Deut 32:8; Dan 10:21, 12:1). The council operates on a *cosmic* level, governing God's universe; on an *earthly* plane, governing Israel and nations; and on an *individual* level, guiding and protecting the righteous believer (Jud 13:8; 2 Kgs 6:17; Ps 91:11).

These activities or functions are all relational—to YHVH. The council members do not act as autonomous divinities. There is no question who is Head of the assembly: YHVH makes decisions and his council responds. There is, however, power of choice among the members; the spirits can decide to serve (cf. the volunteering spirit in 1 Kings 22:20-23, and God's question in Isa 6:8: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?").

Regarding the relationship between God and his servants, Patrick Miller has drawn attention to three "primary theological images" attributed

³¹ On the age of this psalm, H-J. Kraus states: "The deposition of alien gods . . . and the appearance of Yahweh as the 'Most High God' lead to religion-historical discussions that took place in early times and that in the archaic transmissions of the cult could well have had an effect" (*Psalms 60-150* [tr. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989], 155). On Ps 82, see also L. K. Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 51-66; M. Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly. An Interpretation of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 40 (1969): 123-37. According to Wright, Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) was first to suggest that the "gods" in this psalm refer to patron angels of the nations (*The Old Testament*, 31).

to God in the Hebrew Bible.³² They include: King, Judge, and Warrior. Each reflects aspects of his position as head of the cosmic government. Corresponding to these positions, members of his council perform appropriate duties. The picture of God as *King* points to his power and rule: power to control nature and history, and rule in the processes of ordering and governing. Thus, as entourage of the great king, the assembly pays homage to the monarch and carries out his rule by communicating the divine decrees. God's role as *Judge* affirms that there is ethical grounding to his reality and that the universe and human history are morally accountable. There will be, in the end, a vindication of the right. Accordingly, YHVH's judicial members investigate the human situation, record the crimes, and lift the human outcry to God. They also carry out his verdicts of judgment. The third image of God as *Warrior* points to his power to effect a righteous rule and perform the plans of his heart. His assembly then marches with their Lord as a heavenly army, engaging the enemies of YHVH in holy war.³³

Additionally, it is worth noting that all three flow out of YHVH's character as Sovereign Lord. He is Lord first, then King, Judge, and Warrior. Similarly, his servants function in four spheres—religious, monarchical, legal, military.

<i>Title:</i>	LORD [YHVH]
<i>Location:</i>	Temple
<i>Council functions:</i>	Religious

King	Judge	Warrior
Palace/Throne-room	Courtroom	Chariot (in camp or in temple)
Monarchical	Legal	Military

³² P. D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament," 63. Cf. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 189-90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63. Miller has written extensively on the subject of YHVH as Warrior. See his *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973) and previous articles: "El the Warrior," *HTR* 60 (1967): 411-31; "God the Warrior," *Int* 19 (1965): 39-46. See also Wright's chapter on this aspect of God in his *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper, 1969), 121-50, and M. C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980).

One of the main responsibilities of the council, according to Miller, is to maintain justice and righteousness in the universe. “Righteousness” (צדקה) can be understood as an “all-encompassing world order,” a “principle of moral and cosmic orderliness.”³⁴ Sin in the religious sphere or injustice in the social sphere injects discord and shatters the שלום (peace). The council then exercises decisive acts of מִשְׁפָּט (justice), thereby restoring שלום and צדקה.³⁵

It should be noted that “cosmic orderliness” in the HB does not imply the existence of a *cosmic state*, in the Mesopotamian sense. The order and structure of YHVH’s heavenly kingdom is not a self-contained, static object or a sphere of laws and government or realm of independent celestial inhabitants into which one might enter. The kingdom is an extension of the King, an active personal being who is unceasingly ordering the forces and beings in his creation. The “world of Elohim,” the “State,” could not go on without YHVH. No council session begins without him. He is the State himself.³⁶

YHVH, the Head of the Council

Perhaps the one title of God that most clearly reflects his position as head of the divine assembly is יהוה צְבָאוֹת, “YHVH of hosts/armies.” While some scholars believe these “armies” refer to Israel’s human hosts, most think that they are celestial battalions, belonging to the Creator.³⁷ Of the 284 occurrences of the name, no fewer than 251 are in the prophetic books. Significantly, it most frequently occurs in Isaiah 1-39 (56 times), Jeremiah

³⁴ Miller (p. 68) is here quoting D. Knight, “Cosmology and Order in the Hebrew Tradition,” in *Cosmogony and Ethical Order* (ed. R. W. Lovin & F. E. Reynolds; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 149.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ This insight was developed from G. von Rad’s comments about “nature” in Israelite thought (*God At Work in Israel* [tr. J. H. Marks; Nashville: Abingdon, 1980] 116).

³⁷ O. Kaiser summarizes three meanings proposed by the name: (1) leader of earthly armies (1 Sam 17:45; 1 Kgs 2:5), (2) leader of heavenly armies (Deut 4:19; Jud 5:20; 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 40:26; Dan 8:10), or (3) it is an abstract plural indicating God’s power (*Isaiah 1-12* [2d ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983] 126-27).

(82), Haggai (14), Zechariah (53), and Malachi (24).³⁸ As Tryggve Mettinger points out, these prophets have one notable feature in common: “they represent a tradition closely associated with the Jerusalem temple.”³⁹ The name does not, however, occur in the book of Ezekiel, written by a priest during Exile when the temple lay in ruins. The temple on Mount Zion served to eliminate the boundary between heaven and earth.⁴⁰ It became God’s royal palace on earth when he entered it and sat invisibly upon the cherubim who formed his throne or symbol of kingship (cf. Ps 80:1).

In his temple-palace, YHVH did not exist in “splendid isolation” (a conceptual projection by alienated modern man); he was surrounded by myriads of heavenly beings.⁴¹ These “hosts” (צְבָאוֹת) permeated the creation, wherever their Lord reigned. Thus the temple was the junction with the heavenly world, the world of *Elohim* (God and gods).⁴² “The Sabaoth name designates God as the heavenly King, and the element *seba’ot* directs our attention to the heavenly hosts around the throne of God.”⁴³ Thus the name

³⁸ T. N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God (The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names)* (tr. F. Cryer; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 125.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 131. “The Temple is the site at which the category of space is transcended. Here the distinction is obliterated between the heavenly and the earthly, in that both are subsumed under a higher mystical identity. . . . When God speaks from Zion, he also speaks from heaven” (T. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth [Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies]* [tr. F. Cryer; Coniectanea Biblica, OT 18; Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1982] 30). Note Psalm 76:2, 8a:

His abode has been established in Salem,
His dwelling place in Zion. . . .
From the heavens you uttered judgment.

⁴¹ Mettinger, *In Search of God*, 133.

⁴² On YHVH as the occupant and defender of Mt. Zion, see J. J. M. Roberts, “Zion Tradition,” *IDBSup* 985-87, and *idem*, “Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (ed. Tomoo Ishida; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 93-108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 134. Against this view, W. Eichrodt notes that the plural *seba’ot* is never used for YHVH’s heavenly hosts in the HB (only the singular צב is used). He proposes that the term refers “to all bodies, multitudes, masses in general, the content of all that exists in heaven and earth” (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 1.192-93). Similarly, some believe the plural *Elohim* expresses not numerical plurality but “plenitude of might” (Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, 99-100). The LXX regularly renders *YHVH Seba’ot* as

expressed a cluster of theological concepts summed up by the phrase “the present God.”⁴⁴

The Biblical Council and ANE Assemblies

We have seen that the imagery and terminology of the divine council convey a clear picture of YHVH as supreme Head of creation. Yet within the context of the ancient Near East, Israel’s conception of a divine assembly around God could create a real danger. It left the door open for a large amount of syncretism with Babylonian and Canaanite ideology.⁴⁵ For while YHVH was Israel’s chief God, pagan deities could enter his council chambers, so to speak, as members of his heavenly host and receive human worship. This happened, in fact, during the reign of Manasseh when the king erected altars to the sun, moon, and stars, within the courts of YHVH’s temple (2 Kgs 21:3-5).⁴⁶ In spite of the dangers, Israel clung to her conceptions of God and his council.⁴⁷ She had to because it was vital for her understanding of how YHVH governed the universe. “The monotheistic character of Israel’s faith never precluded the notion of Yahweh having a coterie or surrounded by a court of semi-divine

παντωκράτωρ. Alternately, it may express “intensification” of qualities [i.e. the greatest, highest, only God] (H. Ringgren, “אלהים,” *TDOT* [1977] 1. 272-73); or simply the abstract plural “Godhead” (*GKC* 124g; see 124e on plurals of amplification). Thus the term *YHVH Seba’ot* might convey the sense: YHVH is the Lord of all powers. Mullen renders *YHWH Seba’ot* as “he who creates the heavenly armies” (*Assembly of the Gods*, 187).

⁴⁴ Mettinger, *ibid.*, 136. See also his “YHWH Sabaoth — The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, 109-138. For ANE materials bearing on this subject, see L. Seow, *Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David’s Dance* (HSM 16; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 16-19.

⁴⁵ G. E. Wright, “The Faith of Israel,” *Interpreter’s Bible*, 1.360.

⁴⁶ Smith rejects the view that monotheism was a Mosaic feature later polluted by Baalism. Instead, he argues that Israelite religion all along knew deities other than Yahweh, from the period of the Judges into the Late Monarchy. He admits, however, that the deities were “conspicuously limited” (*History of God*, 145). This implies that some anti-syncretistic force was also regularly operating in Israelite circles.

⁴⁷ Even the strongly monotheistic books of Deuteronomy (4:35, 39; 6:4; 32:39) and Second Isaiah (41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 45:5, 18, 21; 46:9) affirm that though YHVH is unique, he is not alone. Cf. the verses in late 1 Chr 16:25-26: “The LORD . . . is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols.” These two lines are not in Ps 105, which contains most of the same historical review.

beings whom he addresses, commands, and with whom he holds conversation.”⁴⁸

Israel also retained the council concept because it provided a powerful apologetic tool. Many have suggested that Israel aggressively attacked existing ANE council concepts by symbolically demoting pagan deities and portraying them as members of YHVH’s assembly.⁴⁹ This so-called “demythologizing or depotentizing” action, it is argued, was a good polemical method.⁵⁰ For Israel to march into the pagan pantheons and sack them, taking captive, as it were, the hosts of gods and goddesses and making them messengers, ministers, and soldiers in God’s kingdom would make a profound theological statement.⁵¹

Comparison of Functions

This leads to a pertinent question: How did the functions of ANE councils compare with those of YHVH’s council? Chapter 1 demonstrated that ANE assemblies consisted of a hierarchy of several deities, some of whom nursed hopes of overthrowing the father of the pantheon. Below them numerous sub-deities served the pantheon. The high gods created the universe through sexual acts or by great murderous conflicts among themselves (*theomachies*). The gods begot children deities and created powerful dynasties. They engaged in “normal” governmental functions. These often included pre-legislative-session parties during which their specially-created butlers and maids (i. e., humans) served at the banquet tables and cleaned up the mess. The gods occasionally chose new leaders and held coronation ceremonies where they lavished praise on the successor god-king. Or they might impose the death sentence on a rebellious god. Towards the human realm, they enacted laws and decreed punishments such as drought and floods for violators.

The Hebrew Bible knows none of this.⁵² The biblical divine council

⁴⁸ Miller, *Genesis 1-11*, 18.

⁴⁹ A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 557 [on Ps 82].

⁵⁰ W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 193.

⁵¹ Wright says that in Hebrew eyes the members of pagan pantheons are “thoroughly devaluated” (*Old Testament Against its Environment*, 38).

operates with a radically different dynamic called “Yahwism”—YHVH alone rules in heaven in *holy* splendor. The Bible contains no theogony, no “history of God.” YHVH is simply the “Existing One,” the only deity. Therefore, he does not beget other deities or compete with them for the throne. None of his angelic “sons” says, “Not thine, but my will be done.”⁵³ YHVH takes counsel and creates man out of love, in his own image, not as an accident or for utilitarian motives because he needs a house-slave. In fact, God provides food for man and dignifies him with co-administration of the earth (Gen 1:26-31). Unlike pagan deities, YHVH is not willful and capricious nor given to angry fits of violence or determined to cloak his will in enigma.⁵⁴ The purpose of God’s council is not for entertainment, debauchery, or self-aggrandizement, but for revealing his will, redeeming creation, and restoring *שְׁלוֹם* on earth.⁵⁵

Comparison of Members

At least two major differences can be seen between the council members in the Bible and their Near Eastern counterparts. First, the members of YHVH’s council lack mythological details. Max Polley says, “They do not have

⁵² Mullen exaggerates when he says that “the Israelite view of the assembly agrees in every detail with that of the council of the gods seen in the Ras Shamra texts” (*Assembly of the Gods*, 283-84, emphasis added). In fact, the contrasts are very pronounced.

⁵³ The HB does speak of forces inimical to YHVH, but it is only in Early Judaism and the New Testament that revolts on the part of some heavenly beings against the Throne are described. The sin of the angels in Gen 6 appears to be the beginning of this revolt (cf. footnote 10 above). The subject of satan, demons, evil spirits, familiar spirits, and such, is beyond the scope of this paper. The HB view of *haSatan* (the adversary) is currently being reanalyzed. For example, see a discussion in P. L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: satan in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), and D. J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC 17; Waco: Word Books, 1989), 18-23. On related subjects, see D. E. Aune, “Demon,” *ISBE* 1.919-22; T. H. Gaster, “Angel,” *IDB* 1.128-34; D. R. Hillers, “Demons, Demonology,” *EncJud* (1971), vol. 5, esp. cols. 1521-25; S. B. Parker, “Deities, Underworld,” *IDBSup* 222-25. On mythological supernatural figures such as Mawet [Death], Dever [Pestilence], Resheph [Plague], and Gad [Fortune], see J. H. Tigay, “Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, esp. 163-67. On the figure of Awen, see H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (tr. K. Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 134-36. Depictions of various ANE demons are seen in O. Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World (Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms)* (tr. T. Hallett; New York: Seabury, 1977), 78-85.

⁵⁴ B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 226.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ps 97:2b: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.”

special functions nor do they participate in feasts and banquets.”⁵⁶ They never come to life as real personalities as they do in the Canaanite or Mesopotamian pantheons. Nor does any member directly correlate to any known foreign deity. R. N. Whybray notes that the Hebrew Bible exhibits “a deliberate minimising and generalizing of these subordinate beings . . . they have no names, no history and no permanent and distinctive functions.”⁵⁷ Even the role of *haSatan* is not absolutely defined, and he is always forced to accept the rule of YHVH (e.g., Job 1, 2).

Another major difference is that YHVH is never pictured as actual “Father” of the divine beings, in the sense that An, Amon, or El procreated families of children gods who might become potential rivals. Rather, YHVH’s relationship to his “sons” is that of Creator; he is their King and Commander. No angel is ever called a “son of YHVH” (only “son of God”), nor is worship of any member of the heavenly court countenanced.⁵⁸ In fact, it is not quite correct to call them “divine” beings in the same sense as YHVH is divine. The biblical writers made certain that no one stood (or sat) on equal par with YHVH.⁵⁹ What Gordon Wenham said about the theology of Genesis 1 in relation to ANE creation stories applies to this discussion of the councils. Genesis 1, he says, “is a deliberate statement of [the] Hebrew view of creation over against rival views. It is a demythologization of oriental creation myths, whether Babylonian or Egyptian; rather it is a polemical repudiation of such myths.”⁶⁰ Allusions to common features of ANE councils in the Hebrew Bible, therefore, may well be part of a offensive theological message: black backdrops on which to project the glory of YHVH.

⁵⁶ “Hebrew Prophecy Within the Council of Yahweh,” 147. In Exod 24:9-11 the human elders partake of a feast in the presence of God. If they are the earthly representatives of the (unmentioned) heavenly elders, their feasting may signify another Hebraic alteration of the general Mesopotamian schema. See below Chap. 3, p. 53 n. 11.

⁵⁷ Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor*, 46.

⁵⁸ Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” 46.

⁵⁹ The later rabbis tended to divert attention away from the council, and especially away from the unknown being who enters YHVH throneroom in Dan 7:13-14. See the discussion in chap. 4.

⁶⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 9.

Visions of the Divine Council

How did Israel know about the existence of YHVH's council in heaven? The primary source, according to the Bible, is her prophets. The prophets, in turn, knew about it because they had stood in the midst of YHVH's throneroom. In fact, admission into his chambers was one criterion for being a true prophet:

Who has stood in the council of the LORD [סוד יהוה]
so as to see and to hear his word?

I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;
I did not speak to them
yet they prophesied.

But if they had stood in my council [סוד],
they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them away from their way,
and from the evil of their ways. (Jer 23:18a, 21-22)

The status and role of the human prophet is a third distinctive feature of the Hebrew council, according to Polley. In no parallel passages in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Ugaritic texts is a human prophet called *within* the assembly of the gods in order to deliver the decision of the assembly to humans. Sub-deities were dispatched to selected human seers on earth to carry the word.⁶¹ In the Bible, spirits (the “sons of God”) only occasionally announce the word of God (e.g. Jud 2:1-5; 13:3-5). Rather, they typically carry out supernatural actions, i.e. those that humans cannot do. Delivering the divine word is a duty apparently assigned to men: prophets were heralds or couriers of YHVH.⁶² This was unique to Israel. Gerald Cooke points out that even though the prophets had access to the throneroom of YHVH, they are never called “sons of God” or “holy ones,” or accorded membership in the

⁶¹ Ibid., 149.

⁶² The messenger formula כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה (“thus says YHVH”) derives from the prophets’ attendance in the *hwhy dos* where they heard the counsel and were dispatched to fulfill it. Only after the Exile, when God’s word to Israel was one of compassion, did the prophets begin using the actual title “messenger” for themselves (e.g., Hag 1:13; “Malachi” means “My Messenger”). See J. Ross, “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” in *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity* (ed. D. L. Petersen; London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 114-18, and Mullen, *Assembly of the Gods*, 209-26. On messengers generally, see S. A. Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World* (HSM 45; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

divine council. They were not divinized because they had stood in the world of Elohim; they remained only mortal visitors.⁶³

The descriptions of their visits to working sessions of the *sod YHVH* have been called “throne visions.” These visions are small specific windows opened on cosmological reality, showing how God thinks, who works for him, and how changes in the world occur. Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss these visions in detail.

Conclusion

This chapter made three points: (1) It demonstrated the widespread presence and interest in the divine council in the Hebrew Bible. The council represented an important and “realistic” element in Israel’s theological world view. The concept that God was “YHVH of the hosts of heaven” expressed the conviction that the cosmically-powerful Creator was also present among his nation, on the wings of the cherubim over the ark in the Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the city of David. He also stood as Master/Owner of the righteous individual. As such, he commanded heavenly armies to protect his beleaguered servants (2 Kgs 6:17; Ps 91:11) and directed the events that molded their lives (Job 1:6-13). (2) It showed that the council concept did not threaten YHVH’s position or uniqueness; in fact, it enhanced his role as ruler over the world of angels and men. As king and supreme suzerain, YHVH administered his creation through a variety of supernatural servants. Compared with YHVH as *Elohim*, the *elohim* of the nations were nothing. YHVH reviewed their performance as “gods” and judges of the gentiles and condemned them for failing to rule justly (Ps 82). (3) It outlined the basic differences between council concepts in the ANE and in the HB. While the other councils were *pantheons*, the assembly of YHVH was a meeting of the one God and his subordinate, semi-divine, angels who served the King anonymously.

— Paul B. Sumner

⁶³ Cooke, *ibid.*, 47.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AEL	<i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i> (3 vols., ed. M. Lichtheim)
ANE	Ancient Near East
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> (3d ed., 1969)
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCE	Before the Common Era
BDB	Brown-Driver-Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BKAT	<i>Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament</i>
BZAW	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CE	Common Era
CRINT	<i>Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum</i>
EncJud	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> (1971)
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
FS	Festschrift
GKC	Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley, <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> (2d ed.)
HB	Hebrew Bible
Hor	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HSM	<i>Harvard Semitic Monographs</i>
HSS	<i>Harvard Semitic Studies</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IB	<i>Interpreters Bible</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IDBSup	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> (rev. ed. 1979—1988)
ITC	<i>International Theological Commentary</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>

<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KB	Koehler-Baumgartner, <i>Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros</i> (1958)
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>NERT</i>	<i>Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICNT	<i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
NICOT	<i>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</i>
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NJV	New Jewish Version [<i>Tanakh</i> , Jewish Publication Society, 1985]
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	<i>Old Testament Library</i>
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> (2 vols., ed. J. Charlesworth)
OTS	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>SBT</i>	<i>Studia Biblica et Theologica</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTS	<i>Society for New Testament Studies</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum, Supplements</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>