

The Hebrew Concept of the Divine Council in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

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Like almost all of their Mesopotamian contemporaries, the Hebrew people had a spiritual or supernatural worldview that made room for a variety of spiritual beings, some good and some bad, possessing a variety of abilities. But unlike many of the surrounding cultures, the Hebrew people embraced monotheism. The way that the Hebrew Bible reconciles monotheism with the existence of other spiritual beings is often referred to as the “Divine Council.” The Hebrew understanding of the Divine Council is foundational to the worldview of the Hebrew Bible.

The Divine Council

The Hebrew Divine Council consists of the supreme deity, Yahweh, as well as His “staff team” of lesser spiritual beings whose role it is to carry out Yahweh’s will.¹ Old Testament scholar Dr. John Walton clarifies the role of Yahweh in the Divine Council; “In the Old Testament, as we would expect, Yahweh is the sole authority responsible for carrying out the functions associated with deity.”² The role of every other member of the Divine Council is to execute the will of Yahweh.

Dr. Michael S. Heiser, a foremost expert on the concept of the Divine Council, explains; “The Bible says God has a task force of divine beings who carry out His decisions. It’s referred to as God’s assembly, council or court.”³

¹ *The Bible Project*. “The Divine Council.” March 14th, 2019. Video, <https://youtu.be/e1rai6WoOJU>

² Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 56

³ Heiser, Michael S, *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the unseen world - and why it matters.* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015) 19

Further, Craig Keener clarifies the roles of the other council members; “These council members were not gods who had autonomous divine authority on a par with Yahweh’s, but they were spirit beings given a role in Yahweh’s governance of the world.”⁴

While the concept of the Divine Council is woven throughout the Hebrew Bible (with implications for the New Testament as well) it is most clearly referenced in Psalm 82. This Psalm states; “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods He holds judgment... [He] said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you...’”⁵ In referring to these other beings as “gods” this passage is not ascribing them attributes like omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence - traits that can only be attributed to Yahweh.

In other passages, like Psalm 89, the Divine Council is referred to as “the assembly of the Holy ones;” “The heavens will praise Your wonders, O LORD [Yahweh]; Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies is comparable to the LORD [Yahweh]? Who among the sons of the mighty is like the LORD [Yahweh], A God [El] greatly feared in the council of the holy ones, And awesome above all those who are around Him?”⁶ (Brackets mine). This passage makes it clear that Yahweh is not simply a member of the Divine Council, He sovereignly rules over it.

Walton summarizes; “From the Old Testament itself, it would be clear that the Israelites thought in terms of a divine council...”⁷ This Divine Council worldview is rather foreign to modern readers, despite the fact that it is one of the primary interpretive lenses that modern readers should be looking through as they study both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

⁴ Keener, Craig and Walton, John, “*Divine Council*” article in the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016

⁵ Psalm 82:1,6-7 ESV

⁶ Ps. 89.5-7 NASB

⁷ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 56

The Hebrew concept of the Divine Council was not a totally foreign concept to Mesopotamian peoples, however. As Walton has pointed out; “The divine council is evidenced in many of the Ugaritic texts as well as in a wide variety of texts from Mesopotamia.”⁸ Many of Israel's Mesopotamian neighbors believed in a council or assembly of spiritual beings. This often led to various polytheistic belief systems.

Yet, the Hebrew concept of the Divine Council did have it's own distinct elements that differentiated it from the views of the surrounding nations. Walton explains; “Unlike the Mesopotamian council made up of the great gods, the Israelite council, similar to that of Ugarit, is made up of lesser beings.”⁹ One of the most significant distinctions of the Hebrew Divine Council is the absence of an explanation for the existence of Yahweh. As Walton points out, the Hebrew concept of the Divine Council never reveals how Yahweh originated, simply that He has always been:

“When we compare the ancient Near Eastern ideas of ontology and theogony to the biblical portrayal of Yahweh, we see some significant similarities and differences. The most obvious difference is seen in the absence of any theogony in Israel. The biblical text offers no indication that Israel considered Yahweh as having an origin, and there are no other gods to bring into existence either by procreation or separation.”¹⁰

Biblical examples of the Divine Council in action would include the Sons of God and Satan presenting themselves before Yahweh in Job 1:6 and Job 2:1, the defeat and death of Ahab in 1 Ki. 22:19-23 and Yahweh's question asking; “Whom shall I send, who will go for us?” in Isa. 6:8.

⁸ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 54

⁹ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 56

¹⁰ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd Ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 51

In order to really understand the Divine Council it is necessary to understand how two central terms relate; “Elohim” and “Yahweh.”

אֱלֹהִים (Elohim)

The Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) is translated “rulers, judges...divine ones...angels...gods”¹¹ The term is applied to a wide variety of beings in the Hebrew Bible; “*‘ēlōhîm*; most commonly refers to God (e.g., Gen 1:1) but can also refer to angels (8:5; cf. Job 1:6; 2:1), pagan deities (Pss 96:4,5; 97:7,9; 135:5), or even humans such as the king (45:6), judges (Exod 21:6; 22:8–9), or a leader like Moses (Exod 4:16; 7:1).”¹² Heiser expands the concept further; “the word refers to any inhabitant of the unseen spiritual world. That’s why you’ll find it used of God Himself (Gen. 1:1), demons (Dt. 32:17) and the human dead in the afterlife (1 Sam. 28:13).”¹³

Even with all of the various applications of the term “Elohim”, it is clear that “Elohim” is not a personal name for the Hebrew God, but more like a categorical term that can be applied to many spiritual beings. In fact, translating the term Elohim as “gods” may contribute to some of the confusion surrounding the term. It is possible that using the term “spiritual beings” might be a more effective translation of Elohim.

The Hebrew concept of the Divine Council is carried into the New Testament and develops into a more comprehensive view of angels, demons, powers, principalities, rulers and authorities. It stands in stark contrast to the polytheistic Greek pantheon that creates the context of the New Testament.

¹¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1996) 43

¹² *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018. Study Notes on Psalm 82

¹³ Heiser, Michael S, *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the unseen world - and why it matters*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015) 20

יהוה (Yahweh)

In contrast to the term “Elohim” is the name “Yahweh.” “Yahweh,” often translated “Jehovah” or “The LORD” is the proper name of the Hebrew God and is understood to mean “the existing One.”¹⁴ The name Yahweh only refers to one being in the entire Hebrew Bible, the God of Israel.

To compare and contrast the two terms, Yahweh is an Elohim, but not all elohim are Yahweh. Yahweh is the supreme Elohim. By way of illustration, one could say that “Steve is a man, but not all men are Steve.” “Man” is a category, like Elohim. “Steve” is a personal name, like Yahweh.

When Ps. 82:6 refers to the Divine Council it uses the term “Elohim” but not “Yahweh.” God’s “staff team” or “task force” are all referred to “Elohim” (it’s a plural noun in Hebrew). Later, in Psalm 89:5, the Divine Council is referred to as “the assembly of the holy ones.” This assembly or council is gathered to Yahweh (translated “LORD”). The Elohim gather around Yahweh, who is, himself, the supreme Elohim.

Conclusion

In the Hebrew Bible there are many spiritual beings or divine ones, but only one supreme deity, Yahweh. The supreme Hebrew Deity’s name means; “the existing One” because He has no beginning (notes Waltons comment on; “the absence of any theogony in Israel.”) The eternal presence of the supreme deity is one of the distinctives of the Hebrew religion, resulting in a monotheistic worldview, distinct from the polytheism of both the Old and New Testament contexts.

¹⁴ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1996)

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