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GOD AMONG THE GODS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FUNCTION OF YAHWEH IN THE  
DIVINE COUNCIL OF DEUTERONOMY 32 AND PSALM 82

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To my wife, Mariel

And

My Parents, The Rev. Fred A. Porter and Drenda Porter

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of the Ugaritic texts discovered in 1929 to ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Studies is one of constant debate. The Ugaritic texts offer a window into the cosmology that shaped the ancient Near East and Semitic religions. One of the profound concepts is the idea of a divine council and its function in maintaining order in the cosmos. Over this council sits a high god identified as El in the Ugaritic texts whose divine function is to maintain order in the divine realm as well on earth. Due to Ugarit's involvement in the ancient world and the text's representation of Canaanite cosmology, scholars have argued that the Ugaritic pantheon is evidenced in the Hebrew Bible where Yahweh appears in conjunction with other divine beings. Drawing on imagery from both the Ugaritic and Hebrew texts, scholars argue that Yahweh was not originally the high god of Israel, and the idea of "Yahweh alone" was a progression throughout the biblical record. However, there are scholars who understand the divine council motif as a common image among all ancient Semitic peoples, and while the biblical writers use the imagery of divine council, they do not adopt the theology. The questions that arise are: do the Hebrew Scriptures allow for Ugaritic parallelism? Is the divine council in the Hebrew Scriptures an import from Ugarit? And if so, what is the function of Yahweh in these council settings? To answer these questions, this thesis explores the views and responses presented by scholars who analyze two key passages in the debate where the Yahweh/El polemic is suggested: Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The “assembly of the gods” is a common concept among cultures in the ancient Near East. The divine council motif is largely found in literature from Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Phoenicia and Israel.<sup>1</sup> The primary sources for divine council imagery come from Mesopotamia and Ugarit. In Mesopotamia, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, *Epic of Atrahasis*, and the *Enuma Elish* are examples of the use of divine council imagery.<sup>2</sup> In these accounts, *Anu* is the high god of the pantheon who presides over the council until *Marduk* is chosen as king of the gods in the *Enuma Elish*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Baal Cycle* and the *Keret Epic* give the clearest understanding of divine council in the Ugaritic texts.<sup>4</sup> In the Ugaritic epics, *El* is the king of the gods and maintains order in the cosmos. *El* is presented as the ultimate authority in the cosmos to whom all the gods answer.<sup>5</sup> The term “ultimate authority” is used lightly here. The Ugaritic texts present *El* in a powerful position; however, while his decrees are final, he is sometimes not the absolute ruler one would expect from the ‘king of the gods.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. Theodore Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman. 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:214-217.

<sup>2</sup> S. B. Parker, “Council,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, ed. Karel van der Toorn. (New York: Brill, 1995), 393.

<sup>3</sup> Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker), 96

<sup>4</sup> Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” 216.

<sup>5</sup> Mullen, E. Theodore, *The Assembly of the Gods*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 24 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1986), 282.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 40

The Hebrew Bible also contains references that some scholars believe to be divine council motifs. The most descriptive references of divine council are found in I Kings 22 and Job 1; however, council imagery and terminology are used elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 32:8-9 along with Psalm 82 are presented by scholars as being key evidence in the divine council debate. These texts are often used to show the emergence of Israel from polytheism to monotheism. However, some scholars point out that in the biblical accounts, Yahweh is presented as the absolute authority in the cosmos. The divine council in which Yahweh interacts presents the other “deities” as inferior to him.<sup>8</sup>

## The Problem

The many similarities between the Ugaritic and Hebrew texts have been the focus of debate since the discovery of the tablets at Ras Shamra in 1929. These tablets describe the religious, cultural and mythical traditions from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.<sup>9</sup> After this monumental discovery, Near Eastern scholarship began to examine the significant similarities between Israelite and Ugaritic religions.<sup>10</sup> The evidence these scholars use are the similarities in terminology, and characteristics between the gods (more specifically El and

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<sup>7</sup> Pss. 29:1; 82:6; 89:7; 97:7; Deut. 32:2-3; 32:8; Zech. 3:1-7; Prov. 9:10; Is. 6; Dan. 7:9ff

<sup>8</sup>Ronald Hendel, "Israelite Religion." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 7. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005). 4742-4750. 15 vols.

<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Yon, D. and Pardee, Pierre Bordreuil, “Ugarit,” ABD

<sup>10</sup> A few examples: J. Obermann, *Ugaritic Mythology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); O. Eissfeldt, “El and Yahweh,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 25-37; J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan* (2d ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1965); Patrick D. Miller, “The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War,” *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 100-107; W.F Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Conflicting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968); Matitiah Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40-41 (1969-1970): 123-137; Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and the Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); David Noel Freedman, “Who is Like Thee Among the Gods? The Religion of Early Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank M. Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, et.al.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 315-336; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Marjo Christina Annette Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Munster: Ugarit Verlag, 1990).

Baal) and Yahweh. These scholars see the parallels specifically in the divine council references as indications of polytheism in the biblical record. Their understanding is the Ugaritic council, with El as high god, was the source of the Israelite council.<sup>11</sup> Michael Heiser explains, “Israel’s council is thought to reflect a pre-exilic polytheistic bureaucracy that included the notion that the gods exercised territorial control over the nations of the earth (Deut. 32:8-9).”<sup>12</sup> He continues to explain that in this view, El and Yahweh were seen as separate, distinct deities in the biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> Eventually; however, the gods were assimilated into Yahweh and the council disappeared from the biblical religion as a result of Israel’s evolving monotheism.<sup>14</sup> Patrick Miller suggests the origin of the biblical Yahweh is found in the Canaanite *El*.<sup>15</sup> He states, “the roots of Yahweh, are to be traced back far (historically) and broadly (geographically) into the religious world of the ancient Near East, and particularly Syria-Palestine. Clan religion, Amorite religion, Canaanite religion – these formed the matrix out of which the worship of Yahweh came.”<sup>16</sup> In this view, “Yahweh” was a cultic name of El, this cult would later split from the patriarchal religion to become its own entity later in Israel’s history.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Mark S Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism : Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).; see also DDD “Council” 392-398.

<sup>12</sup> Michael S Heiser, “The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature” (Ph.D diss. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 8. Also see, Mark S. Smith, *Origins*, 48-49

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick D Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> K. Van der Toorn, “Yahweh,” DDD.



## **The Purpose**

The conclusions of the scholars who examine the biblical texts referring to the divine council is that it is obvious Israel's religious expressions found in the Hebrew Scriptures is not the intolerant monotheism found later in the religion. Instead, scholars use the divine council parallels in the Ugaritic texts and Hebrew texts to prove that the biblical religion was no different from the Canaanite religion. The question is whether or not there is a valid argument for these claims. Does the Hebrew Scriptures allow for Ugaritic parallelism? Is Yahweh the only supreme deity in the Hebrew Scriptures or is there another? To answer these questions, this thesis will examine how scholars on both sides of the argument understand the function of Yahweh in two primary texts proposed to have divine council imagery: Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82.

## Chapter 2

### Ugarit in the Ancient Near East

First, discussion will center on the background of Ugarit and its unique position in the ancient Near East. In order to fully understand the similarities between the Ugaritic high god, El and the Israelite deity, Yahweh, one must ascertain Ugarit's involvement in the ancient world. Second, there must be a brief introduction of the cosmology of Ugarit and the structure of the pantheon which will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters.

#### Geography

The ancient city of Ugarit was located in modern Syria on a tell called Ras Shamra. The tell is approximately seven miles north of Laodicea ad Mare and about fifty miles east of Cyprus. This strategic location provided for Ugarit's great success as both a city and kingdom. Its location provided a cross roads of commerce in the ancient Near East between Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Egypt and Canaan.<sup>18</sup> The city stood at an intersection of maritime and overland trade routes which made it a natural link between the Mediterranean world and the land routes to Mesopotamia and Anatolia. During the Bronze Age the city was the crossroads between the cultures of the Mediterranean and the Sumero-Akkadian world.<sup>19</sup> The city's primary income was through trade between foreign lands, however, there is much evidence supporting the fact that Ugarit also manufactured goods itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Adrian Curtis, *Ugarit (Ras Shamra)*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1985), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, "Ras Shamra and the Bible" in *Baker Studies in Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 19.

Excavations have unearthed remnants of metal workers along the coast which provided weapons for export and use in the army. Further evidence shows Ugarit was a principle manufacturer of purple dye and linen clothing.<sup>20</sup> Wine was cultivated throughout the kingdom as was oil for ordinary and ceremonial use. The southern region of the kingdom produced ceramics that have been found in Egypt as well as in Canaan. Warehouses found in the city indicate that Ugarit boasted a thriving cosmetic industry as well. There are also texts that indicate grain and salt were exported from the kingdom.<sup>21</sup> This made the kingdom of Ugarit very wealthy early in their history.

The kingdom of Ugarit was relatively small. It comprised of a small coastal strip from the vicinity of Jebel Aqra (Mt. Sapan of the Ugaritic texts) in the north to the region of Tell Sukas in the south. The eastern border was formed by wooded hills which run parallel to the coast and is broken by the main river, the Nahr al-Kabir.<sup>22</sup> The kingdom comprised of approximately 200 villages. It is difficult for scholars to know the exact number of villages for their locations have not been clearly identified and over the course of time many changed names, disappeared or relocated making the total count uncertain.<sup>23</sup>

The king of Ugarit played a prominent role in the life and politics of Ugarit. The king functioned as the diplomat to Ugarit's allies and suzerains. Early in the second millennium pressure was coming from the north by the Hittites who were beginning to dominate the Anatolia region. Babylon became threatened after the death of Hammurabi the Great (ca. 1686 BC) which

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<sup>20</sup> Curtis, *Ugarit*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Florence Malbran-Labat, "Commerce at Ugarit." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63, no. 4 (2000): 195-196.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Heltzer, *The Rural Community in Ancient Ugarit* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1976), 5

was cause for concern for the Babylonian dependent commerce economy of Ugarit.<sup>24</sup> The dominant feature in Ugaritic politics in the second millennium seems to be concerned with Egypt. An alliance with Egypt would have given Ugarit security during the unstable times. Egypt would dominate the Ugaritic culture until the rise of the Hyksos in the eighteenth century.

With Egypt under Hyksos control, the Egyptian presence in Ugarit was scarce. It was during the reign of the Hyksos (1720 – 1550 BC) that Ugarit became dominated by the non-Semitic Hurrians. Pfeiffer notes that there are very few records surviving from the Hurrian period at Ugarit, but the city does seem to temporarily lose its strategic importance.<sup>25</sup>

The expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt under Amosis (1552-1527) led to dramatic changes for Ugarit. The Pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty sought to restore their claim to Syria. The northern aggressors, the Hittites, seem to have retreated leaving the region open which resulted in a century of a Egyptian-Hurrian contest for control.<sup>26</sup> Thutmose I (1520) was the first to invade and make his way north to the Euphrates. However, most of the territory was lost within twenty years to the Hurrians. Thutmose III began a campaign around 1482 to re-conquer Asia. He succeeded and by 1475 he controlled Canaan and the seacoast as far north as Sumer, however, by 1471 the Hurrians were once again in control of the area.<sup>27</sup> Astour notes that Ugarit seemingly was untouched during these campaigns due to the city not being mentioned in either Egyptian or Hurrian texts. He suggests the region around Ugarit formed a buffer zone between

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<sup>24</sup> Pfeiffer, "Ras Shamra and the Bible," 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Michael C. Astour, "Ugarit and the Great Powers." In *Ugarit in Retrospect*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 3-30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

the two warring states therefore sparing the city from destruction.<sup>28</sup> It seems by the time of the reign of Pharaoh Amenophis II (1438-1412) that Egypt and the Hurrians had reached a stalemate. Egypt and the Hurrians entered into an alliance that would last through the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries. This peace would result in the trade routes between the two empires to open once again and Ugarit would soon find itself at the apex of its grandeur.<sup>29</sup>

The period of peace between the Egyptians and Hurrians would prove profitable to Ugarit which remained loyal to Egypt during most of this time, however they maintained alliances with the Hurrian kings.<sup>30</sup> The city was enlarged three times to include larger streets and homes, luxurious spaces for royalty and nobility, larger temples were erected to the city's patron deities and the copper and bronze market seemed to have flourished throughout this period.<sup>31</sup> Ugarit would experience a rise in influence both economically and culturally throughout the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries, until the arrival of the Sea Peoples in the twelfth century.

In addition to being a center of commerce, Ugarit gained in scholastic ventures as well. The evidence of cultural diversity in the capital city is abundant. The royal archives contained tablets written in a variety of languages. In addition to numerous texts written in Akkadian, other languages represented were Sumerian, Hittite, Egyptian, Hurrian, the Minoan script of Cyprus, and a previously unknown language later identified as Ugaritic.<sup>32</sup>

The major difference between the Ugaritic language and that of the surrounding Mesopotamian writings is the use of only thirty signs. This writing appeared to scholars to be

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Pfeiffer, "Ras Shamra and the Bible," 21.

<sup>30</sup> Curtis, *Ugarit*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Astour, "Ugarit and the Great Powers," 19.

<sup>32</sup> Curtis, *Ugarit*, 27.

more alphabetic rather than syllabic. Upon further analysis scholars determined that the language was Semitic in origin and closely related to Hebrew which provided aid in translation of most of the texts.<sup>33</sup> The Ugaritic texts contain a variety of literature. Due to the vast number of languages used in the city itself, dictionaries have been found translating from one language to another. Inventories of peoples, places and supplies have been found throughout the city. The royal archives contained diplomatic, military, legal, administrative and commercial texts. The sanctuary or temple area contained lists of sacrifices and of deities, ritual texts and poems recounting the activities of the gods.<sup>34</sup>

### **Ugaritic Religion**

The religious structure of Ugarit is for the most part unknown. The only evidence of their religion is the two temples of Dagan and Baal which offer no clue as to their practices. The only known examples of their religion are in the poetic texts found in the royal archives. These poetic texts do not describe Ugarit's religious rituals, but describe the actions and attributes of the gods. It is through these mythic texts that scholars are able to put together the religious heritage of Ugarit and understand how the ancient people viewed their world. These mythic texts have been the emphasis of Biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies since they were deciphered in the 1930's. The reason for their importance is their presentation of typical Semitic-Canaanite religion. Until this time the only explanation of Canaanite religion was found in the Bible. The Ugaritic texts shed light on what these ancient Semitic people believed.

The mythic texts found at Ugarit describe a pantheon of deities acting as a community to maintain order in the cosmos. In order to understand how these myths contribute to the lives of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Curtis, *Ugarit*, 31.

the ancient peoples ‘myth’ must be defined. According to John Gray, “myth” is technically the spoken counterpart of ritual actions and is evidenced in the religious rites and in the lives of the participants.<sup>35</sup> For example, the government of Ugarit was organized in a communal form, the villages were organized as communes as a reflection of how the myths presented the assembly of the gods. This idea of imitating the gods is called *imitatio dei* which is a reference to the fact “that the actions and passions of deities in the mythological texts are often a reflection of human society; then, through a circular process, the humans justify their actions because the gods and goddesses act in those ways.”<sup>36</sup> In order to understand the Ugaritic religion thoroughly, one must ascertain the concepts of their myths.

The council at Ugarit is quite complex. The pantheon was ruled by the high god, El. The name El is commonly used throughout the ancient Near East as a term for deity. The term *ilu* is found among Mesopotamian texts as an appellative for deities; however, there is no individual god who is referred to as Ilu. The Ugaritic texts, on the other hand, have more than five hundred references to the god El. It is also noted that *el* is used as an appellative; however, the common use is for the high god himself.<sup>37</sup>

The pantheon at Ugarit is organized in a bureaucratic hierarchy. The highest ranking gods were El and his consort, Athirat or Asherah. These two authoritative gods were the “owners of the heavens and the earth and were entitled to appoint and establish various rulers of their cosmic

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<sup>35</sup> John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan; the Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Cyrus Herzl Gordon, and Gary Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient near East* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 159.

<sup>36</sup> W. Herrmann, “El,” DDD, 522-523.

<sup>37</sup> Lowell K. Handy, “The Appearance of the Pantheon in Judah,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana Edelman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 33.

world.”<sup>38</sup> Smith argues that Asherah did not share high rank with El, instead he envisions her as an advisor given her ability to influence El in his decision making.<sup>39</sup> Handy, however, argues that the designations of El and Asherah as “owners” and “parents” indicate her co-divine status with El.<sup>40</sup> Asherah is presented as the co-creator with El as it is through her the gods of the pantheon were believed to have been born.<sup>41</sup> Her children constitute the second tier of the pantheon.<sup>42</sup>

The “sons” of El and Asherah are better described as “active gods.” The term “active” is used in apposition to the characteristic “inactive” function of El to be described later. These were the gods responsible for the natural functions of the cosmos. Some of the gods mentioned by name in Ugaritic literature are Shemesh, Yareah, Reshep, Yam and Mot. The most well-known gods are Anat and Baal. They are the focus of the most extended epics.<sup>43</sup> As the progeny of El and Asherah, these gods were given authority to govern the natural realm. Handy states:

“They basically had free dominion in their rules, which allowed them to fight among themselves, argue with their superiors, abuse their power to thwart others and even kill

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<sup>38</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism : Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven : The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 76- 79.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Scholars are divided on the structure of the divine council at Ugarit. Handy proposes there are four tiers, the first made of the authoritative gods, El and Asherah, the second tier consisting of their sons and daughters, the third tier occupied by “craft deities.” Smith and Heiser both recognize this tier, but admit there is little support for its existence. The fourth tier is made up of messenger deities whose sole function was to serve the gods of the upper tiers and communicate orders from the gods to their human counterparts. Heiser proposes a three tier system eliminating the “craft god” tier. In conjunction with the Hebrew Bible, however, the tier system is further reduced to have two tiers: the authoritative deity and messenger deities. Heiser finds this two tier system problematic and postulates that the three tiers may still be present in the Hebrew Bible itself. The two lower tiers may be hierarchy of angels seen later in biblical record with the “archangels” taking the place of the “sons of God” of the second tier and their subordinates as messengers.

<sup>43</sup> E. T. Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, in *Harvard Semitic Monographs* 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980), 273.



each other. In all this, however, they remain answerable for their behavior and can be called up in judgment before El.”<sup>44</sup>

The key to understanding the sphere of influence of the gods is through the ancient Near Eastern concept of divine function. Walton observes that, “in the ancient world something came into existence when it was separated out as a distinct entity, given a function, and given a name.”<sup>45</sup> He later states that the gods were believed to exist on earth only through their individual functions.<sup>46</sup> The gods of Ugarit were not unlike their counterparts in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The gods were born by means of procreation, given names and given functions or jurisdictions.<sup>47</sup> These jurisdictions are the “sphere of authority” described by Handy. He defines these spheres as territorial, natural or as abstract.<sup>48</sup> Baal for instance was the patron god of Ugarit.<sup>49</sup> He is also a storm god and is attributed to bringing rain and guaranteeing fertility of crops.<sup>50</sup> A more abstract example would be Anat, the goddess of warfare.<sup>51</sup>

The gods were identified very closely to their distinctive function or jurisdiction. Without these distinctive functions the gods would cease to exist.<sup>52</sup> Each god’s function was important to the balance of the cosmos. Handy comments, “the various active deities had the power and

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<sup>44</sup> Handy, “Appearance of Pantheon,” 35.

<sup>45</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Handy, *Among the Host*, 78. Also see Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 114. Walton describes the jurisdictions as “cosmic, terrestrial or cultural,” 92.

<sup>49</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “Aspects of the Religion of Ugarit,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, (Ithaca, NY: Fortress Pr, 1987), 60.

<sup>50</sup> W.Herrmann, “Baal,” DDD, 254.

<sup>51</sup> Day, P.L. “Anat,” DDD, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 94.

resources to maintain their realms in an adequate fashion, whether their realms were political or natural. When the deities failed to carry out their proper functions, for one reason or another, the entire system ceased to function properly.”<sup>53</sup> This concept is most clearly seen in the Baal Cycle. The Baal Cycle describes the battle between Baal and the god of death, Mot. When Mot is victorious over Baal, Baal is taken into the nether world. Baal is then “dethroned” and his natural function of bringing rain ceases thus bringing chaos into the natural realm. It is therefore necessary for Baal to be resurrected so order could be restored. According to de Moor this describes the natural order of the seasonal cycle.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the importance of the divine assembly finally comes into focus. The primary function of the divine assembly was to bring order to the natural realm.

The classifications of “active” and “inactive” deities become problematic when discussing the functions of the gods. As Walton states, “a god who does not function or act fades into virtual nonexistence.”<sup>55</sup> El, for all practical purposes, is an “inactive” god. He is the creator god who creates the “active” gods who rule in the natural realm. Walton references J. Assmann in his observation that it was the creator gods’ inactivity that led to them being replaced by active deities.<sup>56</sup> De Moor explains this dilemma by chronicling the struggle between Baal and El in the Ugaritic texts. He observes that Baal is in constant struggle to overthrow his father-in-law El.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Handy, *Among the Host*, 116.

<sup>54</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu, According to the Version of Ilimilku* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsverein Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1971).

<sup>55</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> de Moor takes the position that Baal was an outsider to El’s divine family. Scholars are not in agreement on this subject. For example see: N. Wyatt, “The Relationship of the Deities Dagan and Hadad,” *Ugarit Forschungen* 12 (1980): 375-379; J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the*

He further comments that this progressive move from El to Baal was slow, but by the first millennium B.C. Baal is presented as the victor and El is only mentioned occasionally.<sup>58</sup> He explains the reason why Baal became superior was due to the area's total dependency on rain. "In contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine was totally dependant on rain for its agricultural and cattle-breeding. In this semi-arid region sufficient rainfall in the period from October through April was crucial to the sustenance of life."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, since Baal was a more active god than El, Baal took the leading role and eventually replaced El as the primary focus of devotion as Walton and Assmann proposed. However; while El may fall out of favor with the people over time, the Ugaritic texts still see Baal as being subservient to El.<sup>60</sup>

This raises the question of the function of El as the high god. As already stated, the function of the divine council was to bring order to the natural realm. Therefore, it can be deduced that the function of the high god was to maintain the order of the divine assembly and thus maintain order in the cosmos. Handy observes there are two actions necessary to maintain order: creation of order and maintenance of that order.<sup>61</sup> All the functions and realms of the various gods were assigned by El. It was El alone who decided the jurisdictions of the gods of the assembly, and it was El who established the thrones of rulers both in the divine and human realm.<sup>62</sup> Handy further notes, "El did not do the work of running the universe, but made certain

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*Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001); G. del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1999).

<sup>58</sup>Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven: University Press, 1990), 75-77,

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> Handy, *Among the Host*, 83.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 84-87.

that those who were supposed to do the work, both human and divine functioned correctly.<sup>63</sup> Cross states, “the exercise of authority by El over his council suggests that his role is more that of a patriarch or that of the judge in the council of a league of tribes.”<sup>64</sup> He further describes El as a social god, “the primordial father of gods and men, sometimes stern, often compassionate, and always wise in judgment.”<sup>65</sup> This understanding of El may lead one to presume that El was pictured as a perfect god; however, that is far from how these ancient cultures viewed their gods.

In the ancient texts, the gods were described in seemingly irreverent ways, but to the ancients this was the reality of their religion. When the people of Ugarit described the divine realm it was a “world full of hate, violence, treason, weakness, greed partiality, rashness, blunders, drunken bouts, and orgies.”<sup>66</sup> The gods were described as no more moral than humans with the same fears and vices. “They feared each other and most of all they feared death. When they did not fight they indulged in heavy drinking and debauchery.”<sup>67</sup> This discussion only serves to show that the divine realm as the Ugaritic texts present it was one of imperfection. The gods were selfish and petty. The ancients observed chaos in the human realm and understood it to be a result of chaos in the divine realm.

The divine council therefore, in the Ugaritic texts presents a bureaucratic system in whose primary function was the operation of the cosmos. Each god was given a specific jurisdiction within the natural and divine realm and he or she was expected to manage it according to the divine will of El. When the gods assembled, they would meet with El at his

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>64</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>66</sup> de Moor, *Rise of Yahwism*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

cosmic mountain.<sup>68</sup> It was here they met to deliberate the business of the cosmos and feast.<sup>69</sup> These deliberations would affect life on earth and could benefit the people or curse the people. It was for this reason that the gods needed to be cared for in their temples daily. The evidence of sacrifice that has been unearthed shows that the ancients vied for favor with the gods on a daily basis.

### **Observations**

The importance of Ugarit is not in their direct involvement in the shaping and moving of the ancient Near Eastern landscape, but in their place on the map. Because of Ugarit's location, they became the depository of information and culture. The Egyptian, Hurrian, Hittite and Babylonian influence upon their western-Semitic culture created a melting pot of beliefs and customs recorded in their texts. It is safe to say that Ugarit's influence in the ancient world was connected only to their commerce and through trade ideas spread throughout the Near East and into Canaan.

The religious culture of Ugarit was typical of the ancient Near East and provides insight to the religious philosophy of other Semitic peoples which the Israelites were in direct contact. As Gordon reflects, "our knowledge of the Canaanites comes mainly from Ugarit. While it is true that this site lies far to the north of the region settled by the Hebrews, scholars are in agreement that the society reflected in the Ugaritic texts is not unlike that of Canaanite cities farther south. The epics themselves refer to Canaanite cities closer to the area inhabited by the

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<sup>68</sup> Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, Harvard Semitic Monographs. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 23-24, 37-38, 98-160.

<sup>69</sup> Mullen, *Divine Council*, 180.

Israelites (such as Tyre and Sidon).”<sup>70</sup> Ugarit, therefore, is a window into the philosophy of the ancient Near East that the ancient Israelites had to contend with. It is clear from the biblical tradition that the Israelites were impacted by their Canaanite neighbors; however, the question remains whether or not the biblical writers themselves were influenced by these same motifs.

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<sup>70</sup> Gordon, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 158.

### Chapter 3

#### Divine Council of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8-9

The previous chapter introduced the concepts and ideology of the Ugaritic pantheon and the function of the divine council in relation to the high god, El. This chapter will begin analyzing key passages of the Hebrew Bible which scholars argue may contain imagery similar to the divine council of Ugarit. As in the previous chapter, emphasis will be given to the function of the high god and how he operates within the council. First, there must a brief description of the hypothesis of the similarities between the two high gods, El and Yahweh. Second, the biblical terms and function of the biblical council must be explored. Third, the function of the high god, Yahweh in the biblical council will need to be discussed before finally analyzing the key passages being considered for this study.

#### Arguments for the similarities between El and Yahweh

Scholars note that there are many similarities between the Ugaritic god, El and the Israelite deity, Yahweh. The similarities are so convincing that some scholars equate Yahweh and El as being the same deity. Mark Smith argues that the similar characteristics and designations for El and Yahweh command their unity. He presents two arguments: first, “Israel is not a Yahwistic name” and “Yahweh and El were identified at an early stage since there are no biblical polemics against El.”<sup>71</sup> Cross also theorizes that Yahweh was a cultic name of El that later separated from El “in the radical differentiation of his cultus in the Proto-Israelite league, ultimately ousting El from his place in the divine council.”<sup>72</sup> However, it is also argued that El is

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<sup>71</sup> Mark S. Smith. *Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, The Biblical Resource Series. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 32.

<sup>72</sup> F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and the Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), See also, J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism*, 310 – 69.

not to be equated with Yahweh, but rather they are separate deities. Eissfeldt argues that El and Yahweh were two distinct deities within the same pantheon and that Yahweh supplanted El. He states, “beside some traits of El which were taken over by Yahweh, the latter appropriated the function of Creator of the world and King of the gods, which according to the evidence of the Ugaritic texts are especially peculiar to El, and which are generally assumed to have been originally alien to Yahweh.”<sup>73</sup> These scholars indicate the critical view that Yahweh and El were somehow related within the same religious tradition. Eissfeldt presents two passages where this imagery seems to appear: Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82. Deuteronomy 32 will be discussed in this chapter while Psalm 82 will be discussed later. Before the passage itself can be analyzed, attention must be given to the evidence of divine council imagery in the biblical record.

### **Biblical Terminology**

The terminology for the divine council is diverse and found in various passages throughout the Hebrew canon. The biblical examples used are **עֵדוּת** (Ps. 82:1) commonly translated “assembly;” **הַר מוֹעֵד** (Is. 14:13) translated “mount of assembly;” **קֹהֵל קְדוֹשׁ** (Ps. 89:6 MT) translated as the “assembly of the holy ones;” **סוּד** (Jer. 23:18) translated “council.” These terms bring the concept of divine council directly into the biblical text. However; there are other references that contain the concept of the divine council. In 1 Kings 22 the council is referred to as **צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם** or “host of heaven.” The council is also alluded to by the phrase **בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים** or **בְּנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן**, “sons of God” found in Psalm 82; Job 1:6 and Deut. 32:8-9. The last designation is of particular interest as the title “sons of god” is also attested in the Ugaritic

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<sup>73</sup> Otto Eissfeldt. “El and Yahweh.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1956): 25-37.



texts. These references to the divine council in the Bible give enough evidence of the council concept in ancient Israel, however, unlike their Ugaritic counterpart; the biblical texts offer little information about the council's operation.<sup>74</sup> However, this does not mean that its function cannot be ascertained. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the unique function of divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

### **Function of the Biblical Council**

In the previous chapter, attention was given to the Ugaritic pantheon. However, the biblical council is not as complex as their neighbor's to the north. Instead, the Bible presents Yahweh as the sole authority for the functions of the council and ultimately the functions of the cosmos.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it is only necessary to discuss how Yahweh and his council functioned.

Unlike El of the Ugaritic texts, Yahweh is classified as an "active" god. This goes beyond the creation aspect of Yahweh which is also attributed to El. Yahweh is portrayed as being intimately involved in the realm of humanity. "The fact that God reveals Himself is fundamental. He appears to Abraham, Gen. 12:7; He makes known His name and therefore His nature, Ex. 6:3; He does not belong to the number of the dumb gods, Hab. 2:18. The fact that God has fellowship with man is due to His free and groundless will and is His first and fundamental deed."<sup>76</sup> According to Kohler, God's revelation of himself to his covenant people is due to his free will and sheer grace. This idea stems from the biblical record of Yahweh as an active deity.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> S. B. Parker, "Council," DDD, 394.

<sup>75</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 94.

<sup>76</sup> Ludwig Kohler, *Old Testament Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 59.

<sup>77</sup> For example see: Gen. 18:16-32; Ex. 16:4-12; 20:1-21; 33:8-11; Judges 3:7-11; 1Sam 3:4-14 etc.

## Function of Yahweh

The functions of Yahweh within the divine council in the various passages are not unlike those found in the Ugaritic texts. The most expressive example is 1 Kings 22:19-28. In this passage, Yahweh is seated on his throne with the “host of heaven” standing around him. Yahweh is pictured deliberating with his council on who will seduce Ahab to go to battle and ultimately to his doom. This revelation of the council is mediated by the prophet Micaiah. This parallels the common divine council function of using messengers, in this case a prophet, to communicate the decision of the council.<sup>78</sup> Scholars are in disagreement over the interpretation of this passage and how the council is presented. Handy suggests that the assembly comes together to discuss the ordeal and they disagree with each other. He states, “The highest authority sought the members’ advice and accepted it; he did not command an action of his own devising that he expected them to carry out without dissent.”<sup>79</sup> Paul House presents another interpretation. He suggests that Micaiah’s account of the lying spirit was to reveal the nature of the other prophets as not true prophets of Yahweh. He further states that Micaiah could not present Yahweh as a liar, but rather the reason for this was to warn the king not to listen to the other prophets. He concludes, “This account portrays God giving Ahab a chance to respond to a true prophet, which is consistent with other similar, earlier opportunities (e.g. 1Kgs 18:16-19:2; 21:17-29).”<sup>80</sup> House’s interpretation fits the idea more of Yahweh’s sovereign role in the council and in the biblical record.<sup>81</sup> The

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<sup>78</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, “Council of Yahweh,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1944): 151-157; also see Mullen, *Divine Council*, 209-226.

<sup>79</sup> Handy, *Among the Host*, 121.

<sup>80</sup> Paul R. House, “1, 2 Kings” *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman), 238.

<sup>81</sup> See Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004) especially pg.144.

story in 1 Kings 22 illustrates the role in which the high god delegated authority within the divine and human realm (see earlier discussion regarding El's function of delegation).

### **Deuteronomy 32:8 – 9**

The book of Deuteronomy is often disputed among scholars. Along with the other books of the Hebrew Torah, the book has been dissected by scholars since the Enlightenment.<sup>82</sup> Critical scholars believe the Torah was brought together from various sources and is a product of redaction.<sup>83</sup> Deuteronomy itself receives harsh criticism due to its unlikely form. The book is presented as a series of speeches given by Moses at the end of his life before Israel entered the Promised Land. Critical scholars view Deuteronomy as being written in the seventh century B.C. due to the religious reforms under King Josiah.<sup>84</sup> Deuteronomy is attributed to the “book of the Law” found in the Temple during renovations. “A common view is that what was found was a law book containing Deuteronomy 12-26 and the present book is the result of a long process of additions to that core by later Deuteronomists.”<sup>85</sup> According to this view, Deuteronomy 32 would be included in the later additions.

Deuteronomy 32 is identified as the “Song of Moses” and the biblical account ascribes the Song to Moses.<sup>86</sup> Critical scholars remove the Mosaic element from the Song and attribute it to a much later date. Some scholars date the Song to the exilic period or to the time just prior to

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<sup>82</sup> T.D. Alexander, “Authorship of the Pentateuch” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. D. Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Wright, “*Deuteronomy*”, *New International Biblical Commentary*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 6.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> See Deut. 31:30 and 32:44.

the exile.<sup>87</sup> Others argue that the Song was probably written during the post-exilic period.<sup>88</sup>

De Moor presents a twelfth century B.C. date citing that the song would be written in response to Israel's defeat by the invading Sea Peoples.<sup>89</sup> This only proves that among critical scholars the debate over the composition of the Song is not settled.<sup>90</sup> Most confessional scholars attribute the book and therefore the Song to Moses which will date the Song to the fifteenth century B.C.<sup>91</sup>

The passage itself has confounded scholars for years in regards to its interpretation. The first interpretive issue is over the use of two divine epithets. Verse 8 uses the term *עליון* translated traditionally as “most high” and verse 9 refers to Yahweh. Smith contends that *Elyon* is a reference to the high god El and Yahweh is his subordinate.<sup>92</sup> This would mean that Yahweh was a member of the “sons of El” mentioned at the end of the verse. The reason for this interpretation comes from the use of the particle *וְ*. If the particle is adversative, the meaning would present a contrast between the two deities in verses 8 and 9.<sup>93</sup> However, some scholars contend that the particle should be considered emphatic thus establishing emphasis on the

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<sup>87</sup> Samuel R. Driver, “A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy”, International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1925), 355.

<sup>88</sup> Anthony Phillips, “Deuteronomy,” Cambridge Bible Commentary, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 209-210; Mayes, A.D.H. *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 1991), 381-382.

<sup>89</sup> J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism* (Leuven: 1990), 155-160.

<sup>90</sup> For more detailed discussion concerning the authorship of Deuteronomy see: Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 6-98.

<sup>91</sup> Eugene Merrill, “Deuteronomy,” New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 22.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Origins*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> J. Muilenburg, “The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle *וְ* in the Old Testament,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 140.

relationship between God and his choosing of Israel as his own “inheritance.”<sup>94</sup> The problem is resolved by examining the nature of the terms used and the structure of the verses. First, the term **עֲלִיּוֹן** is primarily a poetic term in the Bible.<sup>95</sup> It is also observed that the title “most high” is never attributed to El in the Ugaritic texts.<sup>96</sup> Cross notes that “*el*” is not used in the Bible “as a proper name of a non-Israelite, Canaanite deity in the full consciousness of a distinction between El and Yahweh.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Richard Nelson states, “both the context and poetic parallelism make clear that these two designations refer to the same God.”<sup>98</sup> Wright states, “there is no possibility that Yahweh is simply one of the ‘sons of god’ to whom nations are allocated.”<sup>99</sup> The overall context of the verse in relation to the whole song supports the view that the two epithets refer to the same God. The context of the verse is to prove the “sovereignty of God over all men and nations, but it is stated in such a way as to emphasize his particular concern for his chosen people.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Duane Christensen, “*Deuteronomy*”, Word Biblical Commentary eds. Bruce M. Metzger, John D. W. Watts and James W. Watts (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 796. See also, J. Tigay, *The Jewish Publication Society Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 303.

<sup>95</sup> G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and David E. Green. “**עֲלִיּוֹן**” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>96</sup> Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 276.

<sup>97</sup> Cross, *Hebrew Myth*, 44.

<sup>98</sup> Richard D. Nelson, “*Deuteronomy : A Commentary*,” The Old Testament Library. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 371.

<sup>99</sup> Wright, “*Deuteronomy*,” 300.

<sup>100</sup> Peter C. Craigie, “*The Book of Deuteronomy*,” The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 379

The second element in understanding Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is the context of the Song itself. The basic structure of the Song is that of a *rib*, a common ancient Near Eastern lawsuit.<sup>101</sup>

John Weibe outlines the Song in the structure of a common *rib*:<sup>102</sup>

- A. 1-6 Introduction: Summoning of Witnesses – case is stated
- B. 7-14 The Prosecution Speech: Historical Review of past blessings
- C. 15-18 Specific Indictment
- D. 19-26 The Sentence (possible that the lawsuit ends here)
- E. 27-33 An Act of Lamentation
- F. 34 The Judge’s Deliberation (God discerns the enemies’ response)
- G. 35-42 The Decision Following Deliberation
- H. 43 Concluding Doxology

The *rib* was a formal lawsuit document presented to a rebellious vassal accusing them of disloyalty to their overlord.<sup>103</sup> The overlord would begin by reminding the vassal of the benefits that he had bestowed on his servant. In the Song, the historical review begins in verse 7 with “remember the days of old.” Wright observes that this indicates that what was about to be told to them was common knowledge. “Here the full story is told, starting even before human history with the divine election of Israel as the special portion of Yahweh moving on to the historical events of exodus and God’s tender care in the wilderness (10-12), and climaxing in God’s abundant generosity in the land (13f).”<sup>104</sup> Wiebe states that “most other prophetic lawsuit passages focus on a selection of particular historical events (most commonly the exodus and/or

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<sup>101</sup> Christensen, “Deuteronomy,” 792-793

<sup>102</sup> John M. Wiebe, “The Form, Setting and Meaning of the Song of Moses.” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 17, no. 2 (1989): 119-163.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, “Deuteronomy,” 297.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 299. For a historical analysis of the events see K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 2003), 422-500.

the wilderness themes), this song provides an entire cosmology of the nation of Israel and indeed of the other nations.”<sup>105</sup>

The final issue that this verse presents is with the translation of the last line. According to the Masoretic Texts, verse 8 reads:

“When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the *sons of Israel*.”

However, according to some scholars, the Septuagint and Qumran scrolls represent a better rendering. The Qumran texts present God dividing the nations according to the “sons of the god(s)” whereas the LXX renders it “angels of God.” Duane Christensen comments on this problem, “It is easy to understand the change that was made in the MT to remove a text that seems to suggest the existence of other gods.”<sup>106</sup> The acceptance of the “sons of god” raises question as to identity of these divine beings.

It is argued by some that the identity of the “sons of god” has a direct parallel with the Ugaritic pantheon and the seventy sons of El. Day notes “at Ugarit we read in the Baal myth of the ‘seventy sons of Asherah.’ Since Asherah was El’s consort, this therefore implies that El’s sons were seventy in number.”<sup>107</sup> Albright asserts that Deuteronomy 32:8 receives its conceptual background to the seventy sons of El.<sup>108</sup> The number seventy in relation to the divine council parallels is not new to the Jewish interpretation of this passage. Block observes that the expanded

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<sup>105</sup> Wiebe, “The Form, Setting and Meaning of the Song of Moses,” 133.

<sup>106</sup> Duane L. Christensen, “*Deuteronomy*,” Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 796.

<sup>107</sup> John Day, “Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 265. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 22.

<sup>108</sup> W.F. Albright, “Some Remarks on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy XXXII”, VT 9 (1959), pp. 339 - 46.

paraphrase of the text in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan understands the verse to read “he established the borders of the nations according to the sum of the number of the seventy souls of Israel who went down to Egypt.”<sup>109</sup> Block notes since the paraphrase references the sons of Israel, this indicates that the Targum as being based on the same tradition as the MT.<sup>110</sup> While Block agrees that the LXX and Qumran preserve the original reading of the text, he argues that the idea of associating the “sons of god” in verse 8 with the seventy sons of El is far-fetched. He states that it is preferable to search for the solution within Israel’s own traditions.<sup>111</sup>

Finding an explanation for the divine beings within the biblical texts is not difficult. Christensen interprets the use of “seventy” in the Targum to indicate the reference to the seventy nations of the Table of Nations in Genesis 10.<sup>112</sup> According to this assessment, after God divided the seventy nations at Babel and established where each nation would be located, he then “gave the nations as an inheritance to the sons of God.” The view of the nations being the inheritance of the divine beings is supported in the passage itself. Sanders observes that while the verb נחל can be connected both with an *accusativus personae* (the inheriting person) and with an *accusativus rei* (the object inherited by this person). He states, “since in v. 9 Jacob is presented as the נחלה ‘heritage’ of Yahweh the interpretation of גוים as *accusativus rei* is most

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<sup>109</sup> Daniel Block, *Gods of the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 28. Quote taken from the translation of the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan:Deuteronomy. Translated by E.J. Clarke. Aramaic bible 5B (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 90.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>112</sup> Christensen, “Deuteronomy,” 796.



probable.”<sup>113</sup> This would make the nations subject to the “sons of God” as their respective patron deities.<sup>114</sup>

The concept of patron deities is not uncommon in the ancient Near East. In fact, if the assessment above is to be accepted, Yahweh is a member of the assembly of gods who inherits his own nation. That conclusion would be acceptable if the biblical texts presented the Israelite religion as another polytheistic system. The fact, however, is that the biblical religion is interpreted as monotheistic. References to other deities would make them inferior to Yahweh. It is often pointed out that a direct parallel passage to Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is Deuteronomy 4:19-20.<sup>115</sup>

Deuteronomy 4 presents a warning to Israel not to be seduced in worshipping the celestial elements for they have been “apportioned to all the peoples under heaven.” The connection between Deuteronomy 32:8 and Deuteronomy 4 is found in the use of the word *הצלק. חלק* can be taken in two ways: to divide or to assign, without dividing.<sup>116</sup> Merrill interprets the passage to mean “God created the heavenly beings and assigned them to all the human race (Gen. 1:14-19).”<sup>117</sup>

What is most interesting in this passage is instead of the nations being given to the gods, the “gods” were given to the nations. Patrick Skehan states, “It seems clear that the ‘sons of God’ of Deut. 32 are here associated with the heavenly bodies as in some sense the gods of the nations

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<sup>113</sup> Sanders, “*The Provenance of Deuteronomy*,” 154.

<sup>114</sup> Block discusses the importance of nation/deity relations more thoroughly in his book *The Gods of the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

<sup>115</sup> Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning Of “Monotheism”* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 91.

<sup>116</sup> BDB, 323.

<sup>117</sup> Merrill, “Deuteronomy,” 124.

foreign to Israel. The whole series of passages achieves consistency if we say that the celestial bodies are taken in the prose texts as types of real spiritual beings, the guardian angels of the individual nations, who are subject to the Lord and take charge of the nations at his bidding.”<sup>118</sup> Merrill continues to explain that while these nations may have been given heavenly patrons, the worship of these beings is not allowed for Israel (Deut. 29:24-25) or by anyone else (Deut. 4:19).<sup>119</sup>

This interpretation is understandable given the idea of divine function in the ancient Near East. Here the high god, in this case Yahweh, exercises his divine role over the cosmos. He distributes the created elements of the universe to the peoples of the earth which given their understanding thought these elements to be divine themselves or at least the functions of the gods (see earlier discussion of function). In this sense Yahweh practiced his function and right to divide the nations and set their boundaries. The language of verse 8 shows that “all nations received their inheritance and had their boundaries fixed by this sovereign God, whose role was in no way restricted to the sphere of Israelite life and history (Ps.74:17).”<sup>120</sup> Craigie comments that the purpose of language of this particular passage is to emphasize the sovereignty of God over all the nations, not just Israel.<sup>121</sup> Deuteronomy 32:8-9 points back to the event in Genesis 10 when Yahweh divided the nations.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> This idea is expounded on by Paul in Romans 1:18-25. Paul in his condemnation of the pagan peoples, contributed their sin to the rejection of the true God to worship “creation.” While the exegesis and explanation of this passage is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting. Deuteronomy 4 and 32 do not give a clear concise reasoning behind the decision for Yahweh to divide the nations; it simply states that he did. Paul offers the reasoning based on his divine judgment stating in essence, since the nations rejected the worship of the true God, the true God gave them over to their idolatry resulting in their corruption.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Craigie, Deuteronomy, 379.

<sup>122</sup> Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 413.

## Observations

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 presents a unique problem in the area of comparative studies. The polemic of a divine council in the traditionally monotheistic text has raised many questions and concerns. While some may argue for Yahweh and El to be members of the same Canaanite pantheon, there is a lack of evidence that Yahweh was ever recognized as a Canaanite deity as he does not appear in the Ugaritic pantheon.<sup>123</sup>

The ideology of Yahweh being a subordinate of El is also incoherent with the broader scope of the text itself. First, it is observed that the divine beings within the council of Yahweh are not identified and are considered inferior to him. Second, the *rib* pattern does not support Yahweh being subordinate to any other deity. Yahweh is evidenced most clearly in Deuteronomy 32:6-7 where five functions of El are ascribed to Yahweh.<sup>124</sup> Finally, in Deuteronomy 4:19-20, it is accepted that Yahweh is the one who assigned the nations to the host of heaven and took Israel as his own inheritance. Heiser sums up the issue well by saying “Israel was not given to Yahweh by El, which is the picture that scholars who separate El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32 want to fashion. In view of the close relationship of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 to Deuteronomy 4:19-20, it is more consistent to have Yahweh taking Israel for his own terrestrial allotment by sovereign act as Lord of the council.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 360-361.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Heiser, "Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8-9 and Psalm 82?" *HIPHIL* 3, no. 1 (October 2006).

## Chapter 4

### The Divine Council of Yahweh in Psalm 82

Psalm 82 is presented by scholars to be a parallel to Deuteronomy 32 and in a sense presents the same mythic background as Deuteronomy. This chapter will examine the psalm in light of scholars' views of the divine council imagery and examine the psalm's connection to Deuteronomy 32 and the biblical council debate.

The psalm presents no apparent textual or linguistic challenges found in Deuteronomy 32.<sup>126</sup> Instead, the interpretation of the psalm itself is dictated by the myth-poetic nuances found throughout the passage. The primary concerns in this passage are centered on the identities and usage of the word אֱלֹהִים. This chapter will focus on the use of *elohim* and the various interpretations given by scholars. Then it will be necessary to analyze the context of the psalm itself in light of the possible mythic background.

#### Yahweh as Elohim

The first dilemma is regarding the אֱלֹהִים of v. 1a and v. 8. The psalm opens with a divine court scene as אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדוּת־אֱלֹהִים "God stands in the divine assembly." The more literal translation may render this portion of the first verse to read "God (אֱלֹהִים) stands in the assembly of God (בְּעֵדוּת־אֱלֹהִים). This translation has led some scholars to propose that two different deities are in view here: Yahweh the prosecutor and El the seated high god.

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<sup>126</sup> Matitiahu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly : An Interpretation of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1970): 123-137.

In much the same way in which Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is interpreted through the Ugaritic myth-paradigm, Psalm 82 is also interpreted through the mythic background. Smith states that Psalm 82 “presents Yahweh in an explicit divine council scene that does not cast him as its head.”<sup>127</sup> In his analysis of the passage, Smith postulates that Psalm 82 reflects an “older theology.” He states:

The author of Psalm 82 deposes the older theology, as Israel’s deity is called to assume a new role as judge of all the world. Yet at the same time, Psalm 82, like Deut. 32:8-9, preserves the outlines of the older theology it is rejecting. From the perspective of this older theology, Yahweh did not belong to the top tier of the pantheon. Instead, in early Israel the god of Israel apparently belonged to the second tier of the pantheon; he was not the presider god, but one of his sons. Accordingly, what is at work is not a loss of the second tier of a pantheon headed by Yahweh. Instead, the collapse of the first and second tiers in the early Israelite pantheon likely was caused by an identification of El, the head of this pantheon, with Yahweh, a member of the second tier.<sup>128</sup>

Smith’s interpretation comes from his understanding that Israel’s religion was primarily polytheistic until about the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>129</sup> He supports this view citing Isaiah 6 and 1 Kings 22:19 where Yahweh is presented in later writings as the one who presided over the divine council *not* El. According to Smith, Psalm 82, suspected of being written in the Jahwist period is subject to Elohist redactors.<sup>130</sup>

Simon Parker also interprets this passage in light of the Ugaritic paradigm and separates Yahweh and El. Parker notes the difference in “seated” deity and the “standing” deity. He states:

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<sup>127</sup> Mark Smith, *Origins*, 48.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>130</sup> Most scholars agree the dating of the psalm is undeterminable. However, most place the psalm in the “*elohim-psalter*.” For a condensed overview of the views in dating the psalm see Boesak, Willa. “Exegesis and Proclamation, Psalm 82 : God Amidst the Gods.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 64 (1988): 64-68.

Are these the actions of a presiding officer, or of a member of a court? At first sight of the root שפט has a variety of meanings; indeed each of its four occurrences in this psalm bears a different meaning. Its specific sense in v.1 is defined by the speech which the word introduces. This consists of a rebuke as it calls upon the members of the assembly not to pervert justice by favoring malefactors. Understanding the speech as a charge, rebuke, or accusation, we must assign the occurrence of שפט in v.1 the specific meaning: ‘to charge with, accuse of, injustice’. שפט neither states nor implies that the speaker is presiding over the gods, only that he is accusing the gods.<sup>131</sup>

Parker concludes since Yahweh is standing as the accuser that he is distinct from the judge or presiding deity who is seated. He supports his conclusion with a number of references. He cites Job 1:6 and 2:1 where the “sons of God” presented themselves before Yahweh. 1 Kings 22:19, 21 where Yahweh is sitting among the host. Zechariah 3:1,3,4,7 gives a vision of the divine assembly where the high priest, Joshua, is being prosecuted and the prosecuting angels ‘stands’ before Yahweh. In Daniel 7 the members of the divine council ‘stand’ before the presiding judge who ‘sits’. Based on this evidence, Parker concludes, “The weight of this evidence leads to the conclusion that the language of v.1, together with the context of 2-4, indicates that Yahweh is not here presiding over the divine assembly as judge, but rather stands among the gods to pronounce a charge of injustice. There is – tactfully – no direct reference to the president of the assembly. (On the other hand, all modern historians of West Semitic religion recognize within the designation of the divine assembly (עדת אל v.1) and the pantheon (בני עליון v.6) two terms for old high gods (El and Elyon).”<sup>132</sup> Parker and Smith follow the consensus view in establishing the myth-poetic origins of the psalm. However, there are some issues with their conclusions that need to be addressed.

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<sup>131</sup> Simon Parker, “The Beginning of the Reign of God,” RB 102 (1995): 533-534.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 537-538.

The first issue Heiser recognizes is scholars are divided on the issue concerning the separation of Yahweh and El.<sup>133</sup> He states, “although it is widely understood on the basis of texts such as Exodus 6:3 that Yahweh and El were at some point separate and then merged in Israelite religion, this merger could have been a combining of the high gods of two different religions.”<sup>134</sup> This hypothesis does not justify the father-son relationship presented by Parker and Smith. Furthermore, it is also believed Exodus 6:3 actually presents Yahweh and El as epithets of the same deity.<sup>135</sup> This reflects the arguments presented in the previous chapter where El and Yahweh should be understood as the same Israelite deity.

The second problem with Smith’s hypothesis is his interpretation of v.8. He interprets this to mean that Yahweh is here called to assume “a new role as judge of the world.” Heiser states, “this runs contrary to the theme of Yahweh’s kingship over the world, a prominent feature in enthronement psalms and early Israelite poetry that some scholars date between 12<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.”<sup>136</sup> He cites Psalm 29 which specifically has Yahweh “sitting upon the flood.” This early Psalm shows Yahweh’s identification with El in having sovereign rule as high God.<sup>137</sup> Cross commenting on Psalm 24 and Exodus 15:18, accepted as two very early texts, states, “The kingship of the gods is a common theme in early Mesopotamia and Canaanite epics. The

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<sup>133</sup> Heiser, “Distinct Deities,” 76. See also Eissfeldt, Otto. “El and Yahweh.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1956): 25-37.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 60-75; de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism*, 323-369.

<sup>136</sup> Heiser, “Distinct Deities,” 77.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

common scholarly position that the concept of Yahweh as reigning or king is a relatively late development in Israelite thought seems untenable.”<sup>138</sup>

The third problem Heiser raises with Smith is his statement that the psalm preserves an “older theology it is rejecting.” Heiser points out that this so called “scribal error” is really incoherent with the redactor theory. He states, “Not only were ‘polytheistic’ elements of Israel’s religion presumably missed in the editing of the final form of the text, but now it is argued that the redactors deliberately utilized the rejected polytheism to convince their audience that Yahweh is the lone god.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, if Smith’s theory is correct, Israel’s religion with the merger of Yahweh and El would have gradually resulted in the intolerant monotheism in which such references to foreign deities, especially where another deity is superior to Yahweh would have been edited out of the text. Heiser simply argues that this is not the case. The text itself does not allow for such an interpretation. He notes, “neither Smith nor Parker offer any explanation as to why, in the scene they are creating, El the seated judge does not pronounce the sentence. In this reconstruction El apparently has no real function in the council. If one wants to press the courtroom metaphor, then the idea of the accuser also pronouncing sentence is both a violation of protocol and an overstepping of the role of accuser.”<sup>140</sup> The problem with having Yahweh as both prosecutor and judge is not uncommon as has already been discussed in relation to Deuteronomy 32 and the *rib* or lawsuit. Kirsten Nielsen states:

If we are to undertake an investigation of the understanding of God which is presupposed by the prophetic lawsuit, we would do well to begin with a consideration of the roles Yahweh plays in the lawsuit. It would appear...that it is characteristic of the prophetic

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<sup>138</sup> F.M. Cross and David N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975): 45.

<sup>139</sup> Heiser, “Distinct Deities,” 78.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



lawsuit that Yahweh enjoys a dual role of prosecutor and judge. That Yahweh appears as prosecutor can be explained by the fact that it is he who has been wronged.<sup>141</sup>

If the *rib* pattern is understood to be of royal judiciary proceedings as demonstrated earlier, this would indicate that Yahweh as supreme deity was issuing a complaint, not as the accuser, but as the offended suzerain. The assembled members of his council have gathered as they always have (see Job 2:1f), however, this assembly is different. Tsevat comments on this, “It is the normal posture of God, in conception or vision, to be seated as He is surrounded by His servants and ministers (1 Kings 22:19-22; Is. 6; Ezek. 1:26ff), standing is a sign of an extraordinary event. The meaning, then, of the psalm’s opening is that what might normally be a routine assembly, where the ‘gods’ report or participate in deliberations, has unexpectedly turned into a tribunal; God has stood up to judge the assembled.”<sup>142</sup>

The argument that Parker and Smith would take is that v.8 calls for Yahweh to assume authority that previously he was not understood to have. This is incoherent with Old Testament theology as Yahweh is repeatedly proclaimed as universal king. Psalm 24, as commented on earlier, is an example of early Israelite expression of the kingship of Yahweh. Also, Merrill comments “the rule of the Lord over the nations is expressly affirmed in Psalm 47:8: ‘God reigns over the nations; god is seated on his holy throne.’ As the ‘great king over all the earth’ (v.2), he has the right to their praises (v.6). All the earthly rulers not only must submit to him but must also recognize that they belong to him and exercise rule at his pleasure (v.9).”<sup>143</sup> In fact,

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<sup>141</sup> Kirsten Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge: An Investigation of the Prophetic Lawsuit Rib-Pattern* (trans. Frederick Cryer; JSOTS 9; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978), 74.

<sup>142</sup> Tsevat, *God and the Gods in Assembly*, 127.

<sup>143</sup> Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 137.

Yahweh's role as king is represented throughout the Psalms both in early and late poetry.<sup>144</sup> Heiser further argues the use of the imperative of Ps. 82:8 does not support Smith and Parker's hypothesis. "The seated god, Yahweh, is not asked to arise to begin a new, heretofore, unimagined governance of the nations; he is beseeched to maintain the order he decreed in ancient times (a reference to Deut. 4:19 and 32:8-9). He is not asked to assume a new role; he is expected to act because he already is the eternally supreme king."<sup>145</sup>

The idea that Yahweh and El were understood as two separate deities in the religious dialogue of Israel is incoherent according to the scholarly opinion stated above. According to the evidence above, it is more coherent with biblical theology to understand Yahweh and El as one deity. While the mythic background to the psalm's theme is clearly seen, the direct involvement of the Ugaritic El is unfounded. This is a common complaint about Ugaritic studies in that scholars attempt to impose mythic elements where the elements do not belong. It is seen by many scholars that the psalmist sees no other God, but Yahweh as being the active sovereign in the psalm. This conclusion is attested not only from the context of the passage, but also from the whole of Old Testament theology. The question now is who or what are the members who make up the divine council?

### **The Identity of the *Elohim***

In order to fully understand the meaning of this passage and the proposed mythic background, the full scope of the use of אֱלֹהִים in verses 1b and 6a must be examined.

According to Mullen there are three major interpretations have been proposed: (1) they are Israelite rulers and judges; (2) they are the rulers and judges of the nations; and (3) they are the

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 570 – 575.

<sup>145</sup> Heiser, "Distinct Deities," 82.

members of the divine council and therefore should be identified as deities.<sup>146</sup> Simply, the interpretations are the *elohim* are identified as either human or as divine.

### *Elohim as Human Judges*

The interpretation that the אֱלֹהִים is to be understood as human judges is attested by the Targum and interpreted by medieval commentator Rashi.<sup>147</sup> This view has been the prevailing Jewish and Christian interpretation of the psalm for centuries based on the use of *elohim* elsewhere in scripture. The argument some commentators have made is אֱלֹהִים is used as a poetic title for the judges. Kirkpatrick relies on the usage of the term in Ex. 21:6; 22:8, 9, 28; 1 Sam. 2: 25 to justify his interpretation that “it is clear that the administration of justice at the sanctuary by those who were regarded as the representatives of God is meant in these passages, and the direct application of the title Elohim to judges in the psalm is fully intelligible.”<sup>148</sup> Keil and Delitzsch interprets the “congregation of God” to mean the “congregation of the sons of Israel” as expressed in Num. 27:17; 31:16; Jos. 22:16.<sup>149</sup> They explain, “those in authority are God’s delegates and the bearers of His image, and therefore as His representatives are also themselves called *elohim*.”<sup>150</sup> Cohen echoes this sentiment and explains since these men exercise a godly function of administering justice, they have the name attached to it. In commenting on v.6, Cohen states the identity of the אֱלֹהִים, these men are “invested with a divine prerogative

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<sup>146</sup> Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, 228.

<sup>147</sup> Cohen, *The Psalms*, 270. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 592. See also, James S. Ackerman, “An Exegetical Study of Psalm 82,” (Th.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1966).

<sup>148</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1916), 495.

<sup>149</sup> Carl Fredrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch eds. *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

and as ‘sons of the Most High, it was therefore incumbent upon them to conform to their Father’s will.’<sup>151</sup> The representatives of this interpretation primarily follow the tradition inherited from the Targum.

With the exception of Cohen, most of the scholars advocating this view predate the discoveries at Ras Shamra. Cyrus Gordon points out that interpreting אֱלֹהִים as human judges is an example of “theologically protecting God.”<sup>152</sup> It is understandable for Jewish and early Christian commentators to be apprehensive toward interpreting the psalm to accommodate the existence of other deities. As will be seen below, it seems the shift from the traditional view occurred after the discovery of the Ugaritic texts. This does raise the question if this interpretation of אֱלֹהִים from v.1b and v.6 is subject to the same Ugaritic imposition examined earlier in v.1a and v.8. Therefore it is necessary to examine the argument that the אֱלֹהִים are divine beings.

#### *Elohim as the gods*

The interpretation of the אֱלֹהִים as divine beings prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic tablets at Ras Shamra does have precedence. Cheyne refers to the *elohim* as patron angels of the foreign nations.<sup>153</sup> This view is closer to the modern consensus view yet attempts to remove the godlike element from the passage. Cheyne takes the safer approach in rendering the *elohim* as “angels” rather than gods. Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, it is the consensus view that

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<sup>151</sup> Cohen, *The Psalms*, 271.

<sup>152</sup> Cyrus Gordon, “אֱלֹהִים in its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139-144.

<sup>153</sup> Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*, 230.

the *elohim* of v.1b and 6a should be understood as divine figures if not interpreted as foreign gods. Anderson comments, “scholars have tended to identify the *elohim* with the national gods of the various peoples of the world, who have been demoted to the position of Yahweh’s servants.”<sup>154</sup>

There are several arguments for this view. The use of *עֲלֵיוֹן* is a direct title for deity in Hebrew and in the Ugaritic texts.<sup>155</sup> The designation of the *elohim* as “sons of God” in v.6 is also indicative of their divine nature.<sup>156</sup> The divine nature of the “sons of God” is attributed to other references throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Job 1:6 the “sons of God” are easily interpreted as being divine beings. Psalm 29:1 also presents the “sons of God” as divine beings giving praise to Yahweh. Tsevat comments on these passages that, “It is likely that the component ‘sons of’ in some of these phrases points to an earlier conception of the minor gods as sons of the supreme god, El, or of major gods.”<sup>157</sup> He later explains however, that the title “sons of” may just be a designation of the divine realm. He states, “Hebrew ‘son of A,’ as is well known, often has the meaning of ‘member of group or category A.’ Here the classification is clear cut: *בן אלהים* is a supernatural being belonging to the sphere of God.”<sup>158</sup> McKenzie echoes this same sentiment. In his study of the use of *el* and *elohim* he states, “We should recall that these words were not invented by the Hebrews, but came to them from older Semitic languages already vested with meaning. It would appear that the more ancient, if not the primitive sense of these words was the

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<sup>154</sup> Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 592.

<sup>155</sup> Cross, *Hebrew Epic*, 51.

<sup>156</sup> Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God." *Bibliotheca sacra* 158, no. 629 (2001): 54.

<sup>157</sup> Tsevat, *God and the Gods*, 126. n.9.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

superhuman world in which man saw, or thought he saw, the manifestation of being and a power higher than himself.”<sup>159</sup> The fact that the *elohim* are here rendered as “gods” is not uncommon and is quite acceptable in biblical context.

A final indication that may point to the divine identity of the *elohim* is found within the text itself. It is often argued that since v.7 presents the members of the council with the death sentence, they are obviously human. This presupposes the idea that all *elohim* are like Yahweh. This is far from the truth as Oesterley observes, “Immortality is the property and gift of Yahweh alone.”<sup>160</sup> Smick comments, “The stress on Yahweh as Creator is necessary, for the deities were identified with the natural forces of heaven and earth. In a world full of patron deities the psalmist shows that Yahweh is the only and true patron deity.”<sup>161</sup>

Given the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures clearly present Yahweh as the supreme creator deity, he alone possesses true immortality. In short, the other *elohim* could die or at least be dethroned. Mullen states, “That gods could be killed, or condemned to death, is not unparalleled in the ancient Near East.”<sup>162</sup> He does note, however, that while the Hebrew or Ugaritic texts does indicate the death of the gods, they do not present the gods being put to death. This observation is correct on further examination of the Ugaritic myth; “Baal Cycle” the account of Baal’s death is missing from the text. According to the Ugaritic texts, two messengers approach El to report that they had found the body of Baal. When the report is given, El and the other gods of the pantheon are presented as entering into ritual mourning. Anat finds the body of Baal and buried

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<sup>159</sup>John L. McKenzie, "The Appellative Use of El and Elohim." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1948):180.

<sup>160</sup> Oesterley, *The Psalms*, 374.

<sup>161</sup> Smick, *Mythpoetic Language in the Psalms*, 93.

<sup>162</sup> Mullen, *Divine Council*, 238.

him at Sapanu, the dwelling of Baal. Later in the text Baal is represented as being alive having tricked or defeated the forces of Mot, the god of death.<sup>163</sup> The broken Ugaritic texts make it unclear how Baal died or how he was “resurrected” leading scholars to speculate that the god did not lose his life, but was dethroned and lost the power of his function. This does not have a direct parallel to the psalm in question. It only serves to show the idea of death or dethronement in the divine realm was understood in the ancient Near East.

Given this evidence, it is preferred to interpret this psalm as presenting the *elohim* as divine beings who are subject to the heavenly kingship of Yahweh. This as McKenzie indicates does fit into the common usage of the term: “

“Yahweh is *elohim*, indeed, he alone is *elohim*. Others are called *elohim* and worshipped as *elohim*, but they are not truly so. Still other things are called *elohim* or said to belong to *elohim* in a sense which may be abusive, but which to the Hebrew was apparently unobjectionable. They did not seem to object to saying that a thing was *elohim* or belonged to *elohim* as long as it was not made equal with Yahweh.”<sup>164</sup>

### **Function of *Elohim***

Whatever conclusion one comes to in the identity of the *elohim*, it is most evident the psalm does present a divine court scene in which judgment is handed down. Mullen indicates this is one of the primary functions of the council as a whole. Noting similarities between the Ugaritic council and Hebrew council imagery he states, “As El passed the decree of judgment among gods and men in Canaanite literature, so Yahweh is the dispenser of judgment in the

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<sup>163</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit* Nisaba, Vol. 16. (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1987), 79-100. For issues relating to Baal’s death and resurrection see Smith, *Origins*, 104-131. Specifically 120-128.

<sup>164</sup> McKenzie, “El and Elohim,” 172.

Hebrew texts.”<sup>165</sup> This, therefore, raises the question of the purpose of the psalm’s imagery and the status of gods of the nations. To ascertain this question the psalm must be explored.

*Divine Council in the Context of the Psalm*

Dahood suggests the psalm be broken into three parts: (1) vs. 1-4 is the vision of the divine council where Yahweh judges pagan deities, (2) vs. 5-7 the sentencing of the pagan deities for their injustice, and (3) the psalmist’s prayer for restoration.<sup>166</sup> The analysis of the psalm will follow this outline.

The opening verses show the divine council being assembled. Job 1 indicates the routine assemblage of the divine council. It has already been explored the numerous places where the divine assembly appears in scripture and therefore does not need to be rehearsed. It is assumed that the psalm is reporting on the divine council event which is understood to routinely take place (cf. Job 1; 1 Kings 22). Yahweh is then reported to stand in the council. As was discussed above, this issue is raised to show two different deities, however, this has been rejected based on the fact that it is incoherent with biblical theology. However, Tsevat argues that while Israel’s judges are seen as seated (1 Kings 7:7; Ex. 18:13f; Judges. 4:4; Ruth 4:2) God is normally pictured as standing to judge (Is. 3:13; Ps. 76:10).<sup>167</sup> He indicates that while this might be seen as a typical divine council, the fact that Yahweh has stood up is an indication of an extraordinary event. He states, “what might normally be a routine assembly, where the gods report or participate in

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<sup>165</sup> Mullen, *Divine Council*, 232.

<sup>166</sup> Mitchell J. Dahood, *Psalms*, Anchor Bible. Vol.17 (New York: Doubleday, 1968): 268.

<sup>167</sup> Tsevat, “God and the Gods,” 127.



deliberations, has unexpectedly turned into a tribunal; God has stood up to judge the assembled.”<sup>168</sup>

Yahweh, the creator/king of the divine realm possesses the sole right to judge among the gods. As discussed above, Yahweh as creator/king dispensed divine authority throughout the divine realm as indicated in Deuteronomy 4:19; 32:8-9.<sup>169</sup> The primary function of the high god within the divine council was clearly to maintain order in the cosmos and by association maintain order in the world.<sup>170</sup>

One indication of cosmic balance was the institution of justice on earth. Miller writes, “Justice in the human realm was a concern of all Near Eastern religions, but in Psalm 82 the cosmic realm also depends upon justice in the social order.”<sup>171</sup> The divine judge stands to accuse the vassal deities of their failure to perform the basic functions delegated to them. Scholars agree that it seems that the psalmist is attempting to answer the question to social injustice as it is practiced on earth. Anderson observes, “the psalmist’s problem is the question why the weak and defenseless are continually deprived of justice, this is explained as due to mismanagement of the subordinate divine beings who have been entrusted with jurisdiction over mankind.”<sup>172</sup> Weiser goes further explaining that the psalmist may be offering a type of apologetic removing Yahweh from blame. “The judicial function of the lower deities in heaven has its origin in the root idea of the celestial archetype or counterpart of things that happen on earth, an idea that is widespread in

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Oesterley, *The Psalms*, 373.

<sup>170</sup> See chapter 2. Also, Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*, 81f.

<sup>171</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "When the Gods Meet : Psalm 82 and the Issue of Justice." *Journal for Preachers* 9, no. 4 (1986): 2-5.

<sup>172</sup> Anderson, *Book of Psalms*, 591.

the history of religions, and it seems to have penetrated the Old Testament theology of the cultus in order to provide an answer to the question of how the injustice prevailing on earth can be reconciled with belief in the reality of the righteous God.”<sup>173</sup> According to Weiser’s view, the psalmist explains the existence of evil being the activity of the lesser divine beings hostile to God, therefore, leaving Yahweh’s righteousness in tact.<sup>174</sup>

The indictment of the *elohim* begins in vs. 2-4. Here Yahweh accuses the gods of showing partiality to the wicked. The gods, who were given their rank and authority from Yahweh (Deut. 32:8-9) have neglected the primary function of their divine office. Oesterley observes, “The justice or realm of the gods is failing. Everywhere injustice and oppression are rife. The depressed classes – orphans, the lowly and the poor can get no justice. Favor is only shown to the wicked.”<sup>175</sup> This is a serious crime in the mind of the ancient Near East, especially in the mind of the Israelite. The Torah is filled with references to social justice and order as represented in the care for the poor and destitute (cf. care for the orphan and widow – Ex. 22:21; feeding the poor – Lev. 23:22; 19:9; Deut. 24:19-20; providing for the poor – Deut. 15:7; giving to charity – Deut. 15:11). This concern for social justice has been a unique aspect for Israelite religion that endeared them to their neighbors for centuries.<sup>176</sup>

The indictment is presented in very simplistic terms, yet vivid enough for the psalmist to get his point across. Terrien comments, “The eighth-century prophets uttered similar accusations, but theirs were different in style and wording. For example, the psalm mentioned the orphans but not the widows, contrary to conventional tradition. There is also an unusual number of synonyms

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<sup>173</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 557.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Oesterley, *The Psalms*, 374.

<sup>176</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 559.

to describe economic destitution.”<sup>177</sup> Terrien suggests the psalmist may have been personally affected by the partiality of the judges.<sup>178</sup> The indictment, as was discussed earlier, is reminiscent of the common ancient Near Eastern law suit or *rib* where the suzerain indicts the vassals for their misdeeds. Their position in the divine council was according to the favor of Yahweh and like El in the Ugaritic myth, Yahweh possesses the ability to remove them from power.<sup>179</sup> Yahweh has presented his case and will now sentence the gods. As the divine suzerain, Yahweh has the right to both accuse and sentence within his realm.

The verdict of Yahweh is presented to the gods in vs. 5-7. The speaker in v.5 is debated and the meaning in what is said is a little unclear. The verse can either be the conclusion of the indictment spoken by Yahweh or it could be the psalmist who is identified by some scholars as the speaker in v.6 which itself is disputed. The gods are mocked in a sense and declared incompetent. Miller comments, “The powerlessness or incompetence of these gods to carry out their responsibility for ensuring justice is described in v.5 in language reminiscent of the description in Isaiah 40-55 of the nothingness of the idols that have no capacity to see or know or discern anything...”<sup>180</sup> Terrien notes that perhaps this is where the psalmist is inserting an explanation of the cause for the gods misconduct. “They lack knowledge of, or elementary concern for, the plight of the masses.”<sup>181</sup> He continues, “Their ignorance is itself the cause of their misdeeds, for it prevents them from comprehending the complexity and the simplicity of

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<sup>177</sup> Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms : Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, The Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 589.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Handy, *Among the Hosts*, 90. See also Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 593.

<sup>180</sup> Miller, *When the Gods Meet*, 3.

<sup>181</sup> Terrien, *The Psalms*, 589.

social ethics.”<sup>182</sup> This description of the gods having little concern or described as their incompetence is seen in the Ugaritic myths. It has already been discussed that the gods were seen as petty and immoral.<sup>183</sup> If the *elohim* are indeed the deities foreign to Israel as described in Deuteronomy 4, it would seem that the psalmist had a clear understanding of Canaanite mythology represented by the Ugaritic texts and in a poetic expression places the gods under the judgment of Yahweh.

The final element of this verse is the simple statement that due to the misdeeds of the gods in the cosmos, the foundations of the earth are shaken. The ancient Near Eastern understanding between the relationship between the cosmos and earth has already been discussed so there is no cause to rehearse it here; however, it is with this phrase that the idea of cosmic cause and earthly effects is clearly seen. Miller comments, “When justice is not maintained, then the very foundations of the earth are shaken, the world threatens to fall apart into chaos once more.”<sup>184</sup> It is because of this threat of chaos that Yahweh is forced to act and intercede. He then proceeds to condemn the gods to death.

The verdict pronouncement itself is problematic. It is unclear who the speaker is. Like the previous verse scholars debate whether it is Yahweh or the psalmist. Dahood believes the speaker is the psalmist. He states, “The psalmist had been under the impression that the pagan deities were of some importance but now realizes that they are nothing, because they are quite incapable of defending the poor and rescuing the downtrodden.”<sup>185</sup> Weiser holds the position that it is Yahweh who is speaking, “In his verdict God makes clear to them with telling force what

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 590.

<sup>183</sup> See Chapter 2 discussion of Ugaritic Religion.

<sup>184</sup> Miller, *When the Gods Meet*, 5.

<sup>185</sup> Dahood, *Psalms*, 270.

they have been until now and what they shall be henceforth. It true that in conjunction with their office he had once granted them divine rank and name (Deut. 4:19) but now they will share the lot of mortal human beings....”<sup>186</sup>

It would be more coherent to have Yahweh, as the divine judge, be the one to speak the verdict to the accused. Yahweh in a sense reminds the gods that he was the one who placed them in their capacity and made them “sons of the Most High.” Anderson sums up this thought very well, “All the other heavenly beings are dependant upon him for their very existence and they are responsible to him for their actions.”<sup>187</sup> His reference to them as “sons of the Most High” or “sons of *Elyon*” is a throwback to the use of the term *elohim*. Here sons of *Elyon* are not describing a pantheon as found in the Ugaritic texts, rather the term is describing a class of being. Cheyne explains, “[Yahweh] and the inferior, dependent *elohim* form together a company of superhuman beings. [He] is fitly called Most High just as the king of Israel is ideally described as most high to the kings of the earth.”<sup>188</sup> Anderson asserts that the phrase “need not imply an actual kingship with Yahweh, as would be the case in a genuine pantheon.” He continues, “It may denote ‘divine beings’ (i.e. those who belong to the class of gods).”<sup>189</sup> Yahweh states that even though they have enjoyed the status as immortal beings, because of their disobedience they are to be sentenced to death like common mortals.

The fact that death existed in the divine realm has already been discussed. The battle between Baal and Mot serves to show this concept. In the ancient Near East, it was common for a god be condemned to die or fall victim in battle. What is unique about this psalm is the fact that

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<sup>186</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 560.

<sup>187</sup> Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 593.

<sup>188</sup> Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms*, 231.

<sup>189</sup> Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 595.

one deity condemns all other deities to death.<sup>190</sup> The problem alluded to earlier in discussion of the death of the gods is whether or not they actually cease to exist or if they are simply demoted. Tsevat indicates that the gods are simply stripped of their divine titles and deposed from office.<sup>191</sup> He states, “Because the gods have not fulfilled their function, they will be deposed, will cease to be gods.”<sup>192</sup> This interpretation is admissible given the last phrase of the psalm; the psalmist asks Yahweh to “rise up and judge the earth” thereby assuming the functions of the deposed deities. Miller argues, “The whole divine world is rendered impotent. The psalm is the story of the death of the gods. The immortals are condemned to the fate of mortality and merit comparison with human beings and not God. In this sense the gods are clearly and permanently negated. Only the Lord of Israel can claim the just rule of all the earth. Only God, Elohim, has any power in the divine realm.”<sup>193</sup>

In the language of the verdict, the gods are sentenced to “die like men.” Then the psalmist interjects his cry to Yahweh to rise and judge the earth. This is the basis of Miller’s conclusions that the gods were rendered nonexistent. However, based on the previous discussion concerning the importance of function to the existence of the gods, both explanations seem to hold weight. In essence, a deposed god is a dead god. Without any function in the divine realm, the deity would essentially cease to exist altogether. What ultimately follows is the proclamation for Yahweh to take possession over the entire cosmos therefore “inheriting” all nations for himself. In a prophetic sense, the psalmist perceives that since Yahweh has assumed all authority for

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<sup>190</sup> Miller, *When the Gods Meet*, 4.

<sup>191</sup> Tsevat, “God and the Gods,” 130.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>193</sup> Miller, *When the Gods Meet*, 4.

himself that social justice and peace will come to the earth as Yahweh restores balance in the cosmos.

### **Observations**

Psalm 82 is intricately connected to the divine council debate and Deuteronomy 32. The attempt to separate El and Yahweh and present Yahweh as a subordinate member of the *elohim* is incoherent with greater biblical theology. The Hebrew Scriptures clearly present Yahweh as the sovereign over the cosmos and by association, the sovereign of the nations. The consensus view which attempts to use Psalm 82 as proof text for Israel's ancient polytheism is not contextually founded. The psalm only names one deity and the other deities are never given names or fully defined.

Although this psalm is cited as proof of Israel's struggle between polytheism and monotheism, the psalm seems to present a stronger argument for monotheism. The psalmist, understanding ancient Near Eastern cosmology, develops the psalm to condemn the pagan deities in light of the injustice experienced in the cultures around him. The psalm could be seen as a poetic expression of a theological truth. Yahweh is not only the patron deity of Israel (Deut. 32:9) he is also the *only deity* for the nations (Ps. 24; 82:8).

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The importance of Ugarit to biblical studies is widely accepted. It is observed that Ugarit did not have direct influence on the cosmology or shaping of Israelite religion, rather it is the Ugaritic texts' representation of Canaanite cosmology that has garnered the attention of biblical scholars. There is no debate that Ugaritic and Hebrew share many common themes and imagery. The evidence of parallels is convincing even for scholars and students of biblical studies. Divine function and the function of the divine council in the ancient Near East was central to their understanding to the operation of the cosmos. The divine council presented in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82 presents the biblical scholar with the perplexing question to the status of Yahweh in the mind of the ancient Near East. The passages were examined in light of their seemingly close association with the Ugaritic myths and how scholars have interpreted these passages since the discovery of the ancient texts.

What can be observed is the tendency of scholars such as Smith and Parker to insert the Ugaritic myth into the Hebrew texts where it does not belong. It was observed that to separate Yahweh and El in Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82 is incoherent with Old Testament theology.

Gordon states:

“The Ugaritic tablets confront us with so many striking literary parallels to the Hebrew Bible that it is universally recognized that the two literatures are variants of one Canaanite tradition. To the Hebrew writers, however, the mythology is often little more than a literary background on which to draw for poetic imagery. Just as John Milton was



a good Christian in spite of his profuse allusions to pagan mythology, the Hebrew poets were monotheists who worshiped Yahweh and Yahweh alone.”<sup>194</sup>

Gordon also states that while the imagery may be there, they in no way represent the theological convictions of the Hebrew authors. In fact, he notes that much of the Hebrew text is in reaction against the Canaanite influence.<sup>195</sup>

The divine council was just one image common in the ancient Near East and used by the Hebrew writers to express their understanding of the cosmos. They used common terms from their environment to express their understanding of the divine realm and it seems likely they borrowed terms and imagery from their neighbors as illustrated by the use of *elohim*.<sup>196</sup> Miller states, “They used the thought forms, the language, the images that were given to them out of their environment, but they used them and transformed them in the service of a particular view of the intention and purpose of God in the human community....”<sup>197</sup>

Walton comments that while the biblical texts may echo pagan mythology, it removes Yahweh from the domain of that mythology.<sup>198</sup> The Ugaritic pantheon as demonstrated above contained two classes of deities, “active” and “inactive.” The inactive deities (usually defined as El and Asherah) are the “creator gods” while the active deities represent the created realm and forces of nature. The forces of nature were believed to be personal and were the function of the gods themselves. To the biblical writers, however, nature was a created thing, created by a one

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<sup>194</sup> Gordon, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 89.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>196</sup> See McKenzie, “The Appellative Use of El and Elohim.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1948): 170-181.

<sup>197</sup> Miller, “When the Gods Meet,” 2.

<sup>198</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 98.

solitary deity who they knew as Yahweh. In the divine council settings of Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82, the other “gods” are never given names or a function independent from Yahweh. They were totally dependent on him for their existence and their existence is clearly seen to serve him. Merrill writes, “the narrative leaves no doubt that God is absolutely sovereign. He preexisted his creation and had no need for it. Only his inscrutable design called it forth; but once it was in place, the creation became the physical realm over which he displayed his dominion.”<sup>199</sup>

According to confessional scholars, the divine council of Yahweh is not the evidence of polytheism, but an expression of Israel’s faith in Yahweh’s sovereignty over them and over the nations.

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<sup>199</sup> Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 144.

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