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DEUTERONOMY 32:8 AND
THE SONS OF GOD

Michael S. Heiser

M OSES' FAREWELL SONG IN DEUTERONOMY 32:1–43 is one of the more intriguing portions of Deuteronomy and has received much attention from scholars, primarily for its poetic features, archaic orthography and morphology, and text-critical problems.[1] Among the textual variants in the Song of Moses, one in verse 8 stands out as particularly fascinating. The New American Standard Bible renders the verse this way: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."

The last phrase, "according to the number of the sons of Israel," reflects the reading of the Masoretic text בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, a reading also reflected in some later revisions of the Septuagint: a manuscript of Aquila (Codex X), Symmachus (also Codex X), and Theodotion.[2] Most witnesses to the Septuagint in verse 8, however, read, ἀγγελῶν θεοῦ ("angels of God"), which is interpretive,[3] and

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[1] For a recent overview of the scholarship on the Song of Moses, see Paul Sanders's thorough treatment in *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden Brill, 1996) See also Frank M Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1997), William F Albright, "Some Remarks on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy XXXII," *Vetus Testamentum* 9 (1959) 339–46, and D A Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (Missoula, MT Scholars, 1972)

[2] Fridericus Field, ed , *Origenis Hexaplorum, Tomus I Prolegomena, Genesis Esther* (Hildesheim Georg Olms, 1964), 320, n 12

[3] This is the predominant reading in the Septuagint manuscripts and is nearly unanimous See John William Wevers, ed , *Septuaginta Vetus Testamentum Graecum, Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum*, vol 3 2 *Deuteronomium* (Gottingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 347, and idem, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy* (Atlanta Scholars, 1995), 513 Wevers refers to this majority reading as "clearly a later attempt to avoid any notion of lesser deities in favor of God's messengers" (ibid)

several others read υἱῶν θεοῦ ("sons of God").[4] Both of these Greek renderings presuppose a Hebrew text of either בני אלהים or בני אלים. These Hebrew phrases underlying ἀγγελῶν θεοῦ and υἱῶν θεοῦ are attested in two Hebrew manuscripts from Qumran,[5] and by one (conflated) manuscript of Aquila.[6]

Should the verse be rendered "sons of Israel" or "sons of God"? The debate over which is preferable is more than a fraternal spat among textual critics. The notion that the nations of the world were geographically partitioned and owe their terrestrial identity to the sovereign God takes the reader back to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10–11. Two details there regarding God's apportionment of the earth are important for understanding Deuteronomy 32:8. First, the Table of Nations catalogs seventy nations, but Israel is not included.[7] Second, the use of the same Hebrew root (פרד) in both Genesis 10 and Deuteronomy 32 to describe the "separation" of the human race and the nations substantiates the long-recognized observation that Genesis 10–11 is the backdrop to the statement in Deuteronomy 32:8.[8] Because Israel alone is Yahweh's portion, she was not numbered among the seventy other nations.

The reference to seventy "sons of Israel" (in the Masoretic text), initially seemed understandable enough, for both Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5 state that seventy members of Jacob's family

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[4]   Wevers, ed , *Septuaginta*, 347 The Gottingen Septuagint has adopted υἱῶν θεοῦ as the best reading, despite its having fewer attestations

[5]   The words בני אל are not an option for what was behind the Septuagint reading, as demonstrated by the Qumran support for the Hebrew text underlying the unrevised Septuagint First, manuscript 4QDt^q has spaces for additional letters following the ל of its [בני אל]ן Second, 4QDt^j clearly reads בני אלוהים (Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156) See also Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1992), 269

[6]   Wevers, ed , *Septuaginta*, 347, and Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum, Tomus I Prolegomena, Genesis–Esther,* 320 The manuscript of Aquila is Codex 85

[7]   As Allen P Ross notes, "On investigation the reader is struck by a deliberate pattern in the selection of names for the Table For example, of the sons of Japheth, who number seven, two are selected for further listing From those two sons come seven grandsons, completing a selective list of fourteen names under Japheth With Ham's thirty descendants and Shem's twenty-six, the grand total is seventy" ("Studies in the Book of Genesis, Part 2 The Table of Nations in Genesis 10—Its Structure," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 [October–December 1980] 342) Some scholars, Ross observes, arrive at the number of seventy-one for the names, depending on how the counting is done (ibid , 352, n 18) Ross and Cassuto agree that the accurate count is seventy (cf Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis From Noah to Abraham* [Jerusalem Magnes, 1964], 177–80)

[8]   Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis,* 174–78, Albright, "Some Remarks on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy XXXII," 343–44 A Niphal form of פרד is used in Genesis 10 5 (נפרדו), and the Hiphil occurs in Deuteronomy 32 8 (בהפרידו)

went to Egypt in the days of Joseph.[9] Little thought was given, however, to the logic of the correlation: How is it that the number of the pagan nations was determined in relation to an entity (Israel) or individuals (Jacob and his household) that did not yet exist? Even if one contends that the correlation was in the mind of God before Israel's existence and only recorded much later, what possible point would there be behind connecting the pagan Gentile nations numerically with the Israelites? On the other hand what could possibly be meant by the notion that a correspondence existed between the number of the nations in Genesis 10–11 and heavenly beings?

Literary and conceptual parallels discovered in the literature of Ugarit, however, have provided a more coherent explanation for the number seventy in Deuteronomy 32:8 and have furnished support for textual scholars who argue against the "sons of Israel" reading. Ugaritic mythology plainly states that the head of its pantheon, El (who, like the God of the Bible, is also referred to as El Elyon, the "Most High") fathered seventy sons,[10] thereby specifying the number of the "sons of El" (Ugaritic, bn il). An unmistakable linguistic parallel with the Hebrew text underlying the Septuagint reading was thus discovered, one that prompted many scholars to accept the Septuagintal reading on logical and philological grounds—God (El Elyon in Deut. 32:8) divided the earth according to the number of heavenly beings who existed from before the time of creation.[11] The coherence of this explanation notwithstanding, some commentators resist the reading of the Septuagint, at least in part because they fear that an acceptance of the בני אלהים or בני אלים readings (both of which may be translated "sons of gods") somehow

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[9] There is a textual debate on this passage in Exodus as well. Although space prohibits a thorough discussion of Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5, they do provide examples, in conjunction with Deuteronomy 32:8, of the primary guiding principle in textual criticism: The reading that best explains the rise of the others is most likely the original. In the case of Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5, the Septuagint and Qumran literature disagree with the Masoretic text together when they read that seventy-five people went to Egypt with Jacob. The number seventy-five incorporates five additional descendants from Ephraim and Manasseh. This example from these verses features the same textual alignment as with Deuteronomy 32:8 (the Septuagint and Qumran agree together *against* the Masoretic text), but in Exodus 1:5 the Masoretic reading is to be preferred. The point is that one cannot be biased in favor of either the Masoretic or the Septuagintal readings; instead, the reading that best explains the rise of the others is the preferred reading, regardless of the text-type.

[10] Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin, eds., *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places, KTU,* 2d ed. (Munster: Ugarit, 1995), 18. The reading in the article is from *KTU* 1.4:VI.46.

[11] Job 38:7 states that the heavenly host was present at creation.

means that Yahweh is the author of polytheism. This apprehension has prompted some text-critical defenses of the Masoretic text in Deuteronomy 32:8[12] based on a misunderstanding of both the textual history of the Hebrew Bible and text-critical methodology, a prejudiced evaluation of non-Masoretic texts, and an unfounded concern that departure from the Masoretic reading results in "Israelite polytheism." The goal of this article is to show that viewing "sons of God" as the correct reading in Deuteronomy 32:8 in no way requires one to view Israelite religion as polytheistic.

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

A WORD ABOUT TEXT-CRITICAL METHOD AND PREJUDICES

The textual evidence cited above presents a situation in which one reading (that of the Septuagint) is supported by very ancient manuscript evidence (notably Qumran), while the other (the Masoretic reading) has a preponderance of the support, thereby creating an "oldest-versus-most" predicament. As in similar New Testament cases the correct reading can be verified not by counting manuscripts but by weighing them. Hence it matters little that the Septuagint reading is "outnumbered," especially since the more numerous sources are much later, and in fact are interdependent, not independent, witnesses. When considering the evidence, it is wrong to assume that the Masoretic text is superior at every point to other texts of the Old Testament. It is equally fallacious to presuppose the priority of the Septuagint. Simply stated, *no text* should automatically be assumed superior in a text-critical investigation. Determining the best reading must be based on internal considerations, not uncritical, external presumptions about the "correct" text.

Unfortunately the notion of the presumed sanctity of the Masoretic text still persists. The dictum that the Masoretic text is to be preferred over all other traditions whenever it cannot be faulted linguistically or for its content (unless in isolated cases there is good reason for favoring another tradition) is all too enthusiastically echoed.[13] The idea seems to be that whenever a Masoretic

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[12] For example David E. Stevens, "Does Deuteronomy 32:8 Refer to 'Sons of God' or 'Sons of Israel'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April–June 1997): 139. However, since writing his article Stevens has repudiated this view and has accepted the reading "sons of God" (David E. Stevens, "Daniel 10 and the Notion of Territorial Spirits," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (October–December 2000): 412, n. 9.

[13] Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New

reading *could* be accepted it *should* be accepted. Such an approach, however, hardly does justice to non-Masoretic readings that also *could* be acceptable on their own linguistic and contextual terms. Put another way, the above view seldom addresses *why* the Masoretic text should be held in such esteem. Where there are wide and significant textual divergencies between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, many textual studies have shown that the Qumran witnesses demonstrate the reliability of the transmission of the Hebrew text underlying the Septuagint. For example it is well known that the Masoretic text of 1 and 2 Samuel is in poor condition in a number of places and includes instances of significant haplography.[14] First and 2 Kings are riddled with both short and lengthy pluses and minuses, transpositions, and chronological differences.[15] Also portions of the Masoretic text of Ezekiel, especially chapters 1 and 10, could serve as a veritable digest of textual corruptions.[16]

Judging by the survival in Old Testament textual criticism of a "textus receptus" approach like the one that once held sway in New Testament textual criticism, more consideration is needed as to *how* the Masoretic text came to be considered the "received text." Just because the Masoretic text was the received text of the medieval Masoretes does not mean that it merits textual priority among today's extant witnesses, or even that it had textual priority in biblical times. The Masoretic text rose to prominence only after centuries of textual *diversity* and not, as noted above, by "intrinsic factors related to the textual transmission, but by political and socioreligious events and developments."[17]

The evidence from Qumran unquestionably testifies to a certi-

York Macmillan, 1957), 76–82

[14] P Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel* (New York Doubleday, 1980), and idem, *Textual Criticism Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1986), 38

[15] Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 142

[16] Daniel Block, "Text and Emotion A Study in the 'Corruptions' in Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision (Ezekiel 1 4–28)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (July 1988) 418–42

[17] Emanuel Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed D N Freedman (New York Doubleday, 1992), 6 395, 407 Tov summarizes the historical situation as follows "By the end of the 1st century A D the Septuagint had been accepted by Christianity and abandoned by Jews Copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch were available, but in the meantime that sect had become an independent religion, so that their texts were considered Samaritan, not Jewish any more The Qumran sect, which had preserved a multitude of texts, did not exist after the destruction of the temple Therefore the sole texts that existed in this period were the ones that were copied and distributed by the central group in Judaism   This situation gave rise to the wrong conclusion that the MT had 'ousted' the other texts" (ibid , 407)

fiable textual *plurality* among Jews in Palestine for the period be-
tween the third century B.C. and the first century A.D.[18] Precursory
forms of the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, and the Samaritan
Pentateuch existed and are attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls. As
further proof of textual diversity the Qumran material also con-
tains "independent" or "unaligned" texts, which exhibit both
agreement and disagreement with the textual traditions of the Ma-
soretic text, the Septuagint, and the Samaritan Pentateuch.[19] The
Qumran fragments that support the Septuagintal "sons of God"
reading, 4QDeut^{j,n}, are among the unaligned texts.[20]

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

EVALUATING THE INTERNAL TEXT-CRITICAL EVIDENCE
FOR DEUTERONOMY 32:8

Those who assume the priority of the Masoretic text might offer
two explanations as to why Deuteronomy 32:8 reads "sons of God"
in some manuscripts, including the Qumran material. One option
is that this reading should simply be regarded as an intentional
error reflecting the theological predilections of Qumran and the
Septuagintal translators. However, this theory has already been
called into question. The other explanation suggests that the vari-
ant arose unintentionally, that is, the consonants שׂר were acciden-

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[18] Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,* 116–17. See also S. Talmon, "The
Old Testament Text," in *Cambridge History of the Bible,* ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and C.
F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); 1:159–99.

[19] Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)," 395, 402, 404, 406.

[20] Ibid., 402.

tally omitted (by parablepsis) from the word ישראל leaving בני אל in the text in the place of בני ישראל.

This second explanation is less than satisfactory for at least two reasons. First, one could just as well argue that יש was *added* to the text. This is hardly a satisfying response, however, for it is as much of a speculation as the competing proposition. The real problem with the parablepsis proposal is that, while it accounts for the consonants אל in the text, it fails to explain adequately how the consonants והים would have come to be *added* after אל to the text underlying the Septuagint reading. It is particularly significant in this regard that the texts from Qumran that support the Septuagint do *not* read the consonants בני אל as this explanation would postulate, for in one text, 4QDeut[q], there are spaces for additional consonants after the ל of the word אל. The other Dead Sea text that supports the Septuagintal reading, 4QDeut[j], unambiguously reads בני אלהים.[21]

Second, and perhaps even more damaging to the proposed parablepsis explanation that an original "sons of Israel" was unintentionally corrupted to "sons of God" in Deuteronomy 32:8, is that there exists another text-critical problem in Deuteronomy 32 in which heavenly beings—"sons of אלהים / אלים"—are the focus (v. 43a)! Deuteronomy 32:43 reads differently in the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, and a Qumran text.

> The Masoretic text has one line:
> "O nations, rejoice His people."

> 4QDeut[q] has a bicolon:
> "O heavens, rejoice with Him
> Bow to Him, all divinities."

> And the Septuagint has two bicola:
> "O heavens, rejoice with Him
> Bow to Him, all sons of the divine.[22]
> O nations, rejoice with His people
> And let all angels of the divine strengthen themselves in Him."[23]

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[21] Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,* 269 Also see note 5 in this article

[22] The translation of the Septuagint provided by Tigay could reflect אלים instead of אלהים since "divine" rather than "God" is chosen as the translation (Jeffrey H Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 516)

[23] The translations are from Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* 516

It is significant that the Masoretic text lacks a second line in what should be the first pairing. Even more striking is the fact that this missing colon is the one in which reference is made to divine beings in the Qumran and Septuagintal texts. In these latter two texts each colon has its partner. This argues strongly that the Masoretic text originally had a bicolon, a pairing that was deliberately eliminated to avoid the reference to other "divine beings."[24] While the other Masoretic omissions can be explained by haplography, the absence of the line that would have made reference to heavenly beings cannot be so explained.[25]

What does this imply? It suggests, for one thing, that those who defend the priority of the Masoretic text would have to argue for accidental changes in Deuteronomy 32:8 (the missing ישׂר) and in 32:43—changes that produced false readings in favor of angelic beings in *both* cases, while simultaneously accounting for all the consonants in אלהים in 4QDeutʲ. Such a coincidence is possible, but it stretches credulity to argue that the Masoretic text of Deuteronomy 32:8 and 43 best represents the original text when (a) the exclusion of heavenly beings in verse 43 is so obviously a textual minus and (b) its conceptual parallel in verse 8 cannot coherently account for how the Septuagintal reading for verse 8 may have arisen. It is far more likely that both texts were intentionally altered in the Masoretic text for the same reason, namely, to eliminate a reference to heavenly beings in order to avoid allegedly polytheistic language. It is inconceivable that a scribe would have done the reverse, that is, altering an innocuous בני ישׂראל ("sons of Israel") to a potentially explosive בני אלהים ("sons of God"). Therefore the reading in the Septuagint sufficiently explains how the Masoretic reading could have arisen, but the alternative does not.

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

Although some may fear that adopting the Septuagintal reading for Deuteronomy 32:8 amounts to embracing the notion that Yahweh is the author of polytheism, this is not the case at all. In fact a proper understanding of the concept of the "divine council" in the Old Testament provides a decisive argument in favor of the Septuagint/Qumran reading.

The Old Testament often reflects literary and religious contact

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 516–17.

between Israel and her ancient Near Eastern neighbors. One evidence of such contact concerns a "divine council" or "divine assembly" presided over by a chief deity.[26] Of particular interest to the study at hand are the Ugaritic texts, since that language bears a close linguistic affinity to biblical Hebrew.[27]

THE DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

An example of the divine council assembled for deliberation is in 1 Kings 22:19–23 (cf. 2 Chron. 18:18–22).[28] First Kings 22:1–18 introduces the political alliance forged between Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Israel for invading Ramoth Gilead, the approval of the plan by four hundred prophets of Israel, and Jehoshaphat's insistence on hearing from a true prophet of Yahweh concerning the matter. The king of Israel revealed that there was indeed a prophet of God, Micaiah ben Imlah, whom they could consult, but that Micaiah never prophesied anything favorable about him. Micaiah was summoned, and at first he mockingly prophesied blessing for the invasion, but Jehoshaphat immediately detected his duplicity. This set the stage for Micaiah's genuine vision.

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

In a scene that resembles Ugaritic council scenes, Micaiah pic-

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[26] The major work on the divine council is E Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs (Missoula, MT Scholars, 1980) Two works that focus on more specific aspects of the divine council are Lowell K Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven The Syro–Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN Eisenbrauns, 1994), and Conrad L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods El, Ba'al, and the Repha'im*, Harvard Semitic Monographs (Missoula, MT Scholars, 1979)

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

[28] In addition to the two primary examples of the council in the Old Testament discussed in this section, see also Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 1–8

tured Yahweh as the sovereign,[29] enthroned among the members of His council and directly addressing its members, who "stand" (a technical term[30]) before Him.[31] The question God asked occurs in a form paralleled in Ugaritic literature and other passages involving Yahweh's presence in the Hebrew Bible.[32] God then approved the course of action He knew would be successful, and a messenger (the "spirit"[33] in 1 Kings 22:21, but often a prophet) was commissioned. This does not mean that Yahweh lacks ideas or that the council members exercise independent authority, but rather that the council serves only to "reemphasize and execute His decisions."[34] This pattern is also seen in the Ugaritic council texts.[35] In 1 Kings 22 Micaiah was permitted to observe the deliberations of the divine "boardroom meeting" and thus as a messenger of the divine assembly he could pronounce with certainty the Lord's message.

A second example of the divine council is in Psalm 82:1–8. "God [אלהים][36] standeth in the congregation of the mighty [בַּעֲדַת־אֵל]; he judgeth among the gods [אלהים]. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah. Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. They [i.e., אלהים] know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course. I have said, Ye are gods [אלהים]; and all of you are children of the most

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[29] The chief deity and leader of the council at Ugarit was called El. The Hebrew text makes it clear that El is Israel's God (Gen. 33:20) as well (although the אל of the Bible does not share behaviors of His Ugaritic counterpart) and that Yahweh is El (Deut. 7:9; 10:17; 2 Sam. 22:31; Ps. 85:8; Isa. 42:5; Jer. 32:18). Also numerous epithets of the Ugaritic high god El are used of Yahweh in the Old Testament (Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 44–76).

[30] Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 207, 209–26. In this regard it is interesting to note Isaiah 6:2 in the Septuagint, where the angelic beings in the passage stand *before* Yahweh, not above Him as in the Masoretic text.

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

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

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

[34] Ibid., 207.

[35] Ibid., 206.

[36] The Masoretic text is used here. As is noted in several of the studies cited subsequently, the only meaningful variant in the text is whether the first occurrence of אלהים in verse 1 should be replaced by יהוה. The choice makes no difference for the interpretation of the psalm.

High [וּבְנֵי עֶלְיוֹן]. But ye shall die like men [Adam], and fall like one of the princes [the Shining Ones].[37] Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations" (KJV).

This psalm has generated much scholarly controversy.[38] The problem focuses on the meaning of אֱלֹהִים in verses 1b and 6a.[39] How can God (אֱלֹהִים) be said to be standing in the council of God (אֵל) *in the midst* of a (singular) God (אֱלֹהִים)? It would seem obvious that the second אֱלֹהִים (v. 1b) must be pluralized, but since this allegedly smacks of polytheism, many commentators have resisted the translation "gods." Therefore other interpretations of אֱלֹהִים in verses 1b and 6a have been offered: (a) אֱלֹהִים are Israelite rulers and judges; (b) אֱלֹהִים are rulers and judges of the nations; or (c) אֱלֹהִים are members of the divine council. In reality the latter two options are both correct and must be combined for an accurate interpretation of the psalm.[40]

As Cyrus Gordon pointed out over sixty years ago, understanding אֱלֹהִים as Israelite "rulers" or "judges" lacks validity and is an example of theologically "protecting" God.[41] Since Gordon adequately chronicled the examples in which אֱלֹהִים is only specula-

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[37] The Hebrew here is כְּאַחַד הַשָּׂרִים, which is usually translated "like one of the princes," under the assumption that the noun הַשָּׂרִים is related to the Akkadian *šarru*, meaning "ruler, prince." While there may be some question about whether the verbal form *šarāru* means "shine," the adjective form *šarūru* certainly does mean "shining," as evidenced by its use in astronomical texts to describe the planet Venus (Hugh R. Page, *The Myth of Rebellion* [New York: Brill, 1996], 97, n. 134). Psalm 82:7 could therefore contain a substantive use of the cognate adjective (see also Mullen, *The Divine Council*, 239–40). The reference to a "Shining One" in verse 7 is paralleled by Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:12–17, where heavenly beings are in view (or where tales of heavenly beings form the backdrop for these passages). Ezekiel 28:13–16 and Isaiah 14:12–15 provide an overt linguistic connection between Eden and the holy Mount of Assembly, where the divine council at Ugarit and in the Old Testament held its meetings. The אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82:7 will die like Adam and fall like one of the "shining ones" did (see Ezek. 28:12–17). The point of the verse is that the beings judged in the psalm will be (or were) stripped of immortality and cast from their high estate, just as Adam and that heavenly being who was punished in the same manner earlier had been punished. The word שַׂר ("prince") is used in Daniel 10:13, 20–21; 12:1 to identify heavenly beings—those אֱלֹהִים who still rule the nations, and Michael, guardian of God's portion, Israel (Deut. 4:19; 32:8–9).

[38] See Julian Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14 (1939): 29–98; W. S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" *Biblica* 76:2 (1995), 219–28; and Lowell Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 51–66.

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

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

[41] Cyrus Gordon, "אֱלֹהִים in Its Reputed Meaning of *Rulers, Judges*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139–44.

tively translated as "rulers" or "judges"[42] and demonstrated that in each case such a translation is unnecessary, this article focuses on features of Psalm 82 that show that אלהים in verses 1b and 6a should be translated "gods" or better, "heavenly beings."

Several external considerations point to Psalm 82:1b and 6a as describing the divine council and its "heavenly beings." First, the fact that the אלהים in verse 6a are called בני עליון is a strong argument for their heavenly nature, because עליון is an obvious title for deity in both Hebrew and Ugaritic. In the Bible and Ugaritic religious texts the word עליון refers only to God / El.[43] The point is that the divine character of the offspring of El in the Ugaritic texts is beyond question. That the same descriptive appellation for those offspring is used many times in the Old Testament of nonhuman inhabitants of the heavens makes the translation "human judges" nonsensical[44] and ignores the comparative Semitic philology. Second, the terms and themes in this psalm are present in Ugaritic literature. "Elyon," "princes," and "gods," are all present in the Ugaritic poem "The Gracious Gods," and it is quite telling that the notion above in Psalm 82:7 of the אלהים "falling" like "one of the Shining Ones" is found in a specific episode "in which the fall of one of the *bn srm* ('sons of the shining ones') of the heavenly congregation was depicted."[45] Third, the fact that the psalm speaks of rendering justice to the poor and needy does not argue for human judges, since the council terminology from Sumer, Akkad, and Ugarit "referred originally to the political organ of a primitive democracy, a phenomenon which can be discerned *in the pantheons* of various non-Israelite cultures."[46] Fourth, verses such as Isaiah

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[42] For example see Jay P. Green, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 43a.

[43] In Genesis 14:18 אל עליון is translated "God Most High." On the use of עליון in Ugaritic as either an epithet of El or a "double name of a single god," see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 51.

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

[45] Ibid.

[46] Matitiahu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40–41 (1969–1970): 127 (italics added); and Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion,* 158–64. In all these ancient religions, as well as in the theology of the Old Testament, the gods / God and their / His council were *supposed* to render right judgment for the oppressed and the poor (see Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 231–38). The earth itself was founded on justice (Isa. 28:16–17) and each member of the council had his own earthly responsibilities (Deut. 4:19; 32:8–9, as noted in the Septuagint and Qumran). As Gordon also notes, "The duty of rulers (gods and kings alike) is to protect the weak from the strong" (Cyrus Gordon, "History of Religion in Psalm 82,"

24:21 ("In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below," NIV) clearly *distinguish* between Yahweh's host and earthly rulers.

Internal features of Psalm 82 place beyond dispute the view that אלהים in verses 1b and 6a are not human judges. Two recent articles on Psalm 82 have produced a number of structural proofs in favor of this view.[47] Two observations will suffice here. First, Psalm 82:1 has a chiastic structure that compels the understanding that the second אלהים does not refer to human beings:

a. אלהים נצב ("God takes His stand")

    b. בעדת־אל ("in the congregation of God")

    b.' בקרב אלהים ("in the midst of gods")

a.' ישפט ("He judges")

Second, the particle אכן in verse 7 indicates "a strong antithetical relationship with v. 6."[48] The presence of אמרתי introducing the clause before אכן means roughly "I had thought . . . but."[49] The contrast is, of course, between the speaker of verse 6, Yahweh (who in either view is the only One who has the authority to render the death sentence for these אלהים), and the אלהים of verse 6a—the word being in parallel to בני עליון ("sons of the Most High"). So interpreting the phrase "you shall die like Adam" (v. 7) as referring to *human* judges would contradict the contrasts required by the syntax. It would also require ignoring the parallel here with the judgment on Adam and Eve. The point is not that the אלהים were put to death at the moment Yahweh judged them, but that they *must die as a result of their actions* (i.e., they would become mortal).[50] Moreover, as Smick noted, "if they are going to die *like* mortals, they are not

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in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor,* ed. Gary A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 129–31 (see esp. 130).

[47] Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" 222–28; and Handy, "Sounds, Words, and Meanings in Psalm 82," 51–66. See also Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 226ff.

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

[49] Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," 33.

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

mortals."[51] The initial immortality of those suffering this judgment is clearly presupposed.[52]

THE DIVINE COUNCIL AND THE VOCABULARY OF BIBLICAL HEBREW

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

Terminology for the assembly.[53] The literature of Ugarit has a number of designations for the divine assembly or council. The two most common at Ugarit are *pḫr* with its related form *mpḫr*, both meaning "congregation, assembly,"[54] and *dr,* meaning "generation, assemblage."[55] The phrases *pḫr 'ilm* ("congregation of the gods"), *mpḫrt bn 'ilm* ("congregation of the sons of the gods"), and *dr bn 'il* ("generation of the sons of El") are quite common.[56] None of these forms is used in biblical Hebrew as exact *linguistic* equivalents, though their *conceptual* equivalence is clear.

A common appellation for the divine assembly at Ugarit is *'dt 'ilm* ("assembly of the gods"),[57] a phrase that corresponds exactly to the one in Psalm 82:1 (בַּעֲדַת־אֵל, "in the assembly of God"). Another Hebrew term for the council that has an equivalent in Ugaritic is סוֹד ("assembly").[58] (See, for example, Jeremiah 23:18, 22).[59]

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

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

[53] For a full discussion of this topic see Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 111–27.

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

[55] Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual,* 256.

[56] For example *KTU* 1.47:29; 1.148; 1.40:25; 1.65:3; 1.2 (cf. E. Theodore Mullen, "Divine Assembly," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* 2:214–15).

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

[58] For example see Psalm 55:14 (Heb., 15; translated "throng" in NIV); Jer. 6:11

When in a vision Isaiah saw Yahweh enthroned and minis-
tered to by seraphim, he heard the Lord ask, "Whom shall I send,
and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8, NIV). The winged creatures in
verses 2–3 have undeniable parallels in the Ugaritic council
scenes.[60] In fact visions or auditory revelations of Yahweh and His
divine council were viewed as an authentication of the veracity of
the prophet's message and status, a test of true "propheticity."[61]

Terminology for the members of the assembly.[62] Ugaritic litera-
ture regularly refers to heavenly beings as *phr kkbm* (the "congrega-
tion of the stars"),[63] language corresponding to כוכבי בקר ("morning
stars"; in parallelism with the "sons of God" in Job 38:7) and
כוכבי אל (the "stars of God," Isa. 14:13). Aside from the context of
these references, each of which clearly points to personal beings,
not astronomical phenomena, it is significant that in the entire an-
cient Near Eastern literary record, El is never identified with a
heavenly body. Thus the phrase "the stars of El" points to created
beings with exalted status.[64] The Hebrew Bible also uses קדשים

("assembly" in KJV), Proverbs 15 22 ("advisers" in NIV) For the Ugaritic see *KTU*
1 20 I 4, and Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds,* 271

[59] The King James Version translation of "counsel" instead of "council" in
Jeremiah 23 18, 22 is another example of how the linguistic parallels with the an-
cient Near Eastern "council" terminology are missed

[60] Ibid , 207 Mullen argues that the winged creatures / seraphim are council
members, but elsewhere in his book he notes that such fiery (cf the root *srp* for the
seraphim) messengers are mere emissaries to the council at Ugarit (*The Divine
Council,* 140) Handy argues that the seraphim at Ugarit and in biblical Hebrew are
only messenger "gods" (a term appropriate only for a polytheistic context), had no
independent personal volition, were clearly a subclass (even in Jewish tradition),
and were most likely the "security guards" of the heavenly throne room where the
council met (Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven,* 151–56) They are thus only ser-
vants of the council membership and its head, not members It seems more likely,
however, that the whole heavenly host constitutes the divine council (cf 1 Kings
22 19) but that there was a hierarchical arrangement within the council

[61] H Wheeler Robinson demonstrated that the divine council forms the back-
ground for the commissioning of the prophet ("The Council of Yahweh," *Journal of
Theological Studies* 45 [1944] 151–57) See also Christopher Seitz, "The Divine
Council Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal of
Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 229–47, Frank M Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in
Second Isaiah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953) 274–77, and Mullen, *The
Divine Council,* 215–26

[62] See Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 175–208, and Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds,*
269–99

[63] *KTU* 1 10 I 4

[64] Ulf Oldenburg, "Above the Stars of El El in Ancient South Arabic Religion,"
Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 82 (1970) 187–208 (esp 197)

("holy ones") and צְבָאוֹת ("hosts") for inhabitants of heaven,[65] a term not utilized in Ugaritic for the heavenly host. The "hosts" of Yahweh (יהוה צְבָאוֹת) is an umbrella term that includes the variety of categories of nonhuman beings who serve God.[66] In fact Miller has argued that the "host" of heaven, the divine council, and the Old Testament's portrait of Yahweh as a warrior are linked.[67]

The members of the assembly at Ugarit are unambiguously classified as *'ilm* ("gods"), *bn 'il* ("sons of El"), and *bn 'ilm* ("sons of the gods").[68] Specifically in the Keret Epic the Canaanite chief deity El sits at the head of the assembly and four times he addresses its members as either *'ilm* ("gods") or *bny* ("my sons").[69] Both Ugaritic and biblical Hebrew use *ml'k* ("messenger," typically translated "angel") to denote heavenly beings. In Ugaritic and in the Old Testament the terms אלהים, אלים, and בני אלהים are not equated with the מַלְאָכִים ("messengers"). All these beings are members of the divine council, but within that council a hierarchy exists.[70]

Terminology for the meeting place of the assembly.[71] In Ugaritic mythology El and his council met to govern the cosmos at the "sources of the two rivers," in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep," and in the "domed tent" of El, located on the mountain of El, Mount Sapanu.[72] This mountainous meeting place was also designated *phr m'd,* the place of the "assembled congregation,"[73] and was associated with both physical and mythical peaks

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[65] Job 5:1; 15:15 (Qere); Psalms 89:6–7 (Heb., 7–8); 103:21; Zechariah 14:5. See Carol A. Newsom, "Angels," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* 1:248.

[66] See Psalms 103:19–21; 148:1–5. However, several passages unambiguously distinguish heavenly beings from others (e.g., Isa. 24:21, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high [צְבָא הַמָּרוֹם בַּמָּרוֹם], and the kings of the earth upon the earth," KJV), and other passages describe those that dwell in the "heights" (e.g., 14:12–15).

[67] Patrick D. Miller, "The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 101–7.

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

[69] See *KTU* 1.16.V.1–28 for El's leadership in the council.

[70] Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven,* 151–59; Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 210–16; and Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds,* 289–317. See *KTU* 1.2:I.11; 1.13:25.

[71] Full discussions of this topic occur in Mullen, *The Divine Council,* 128–74, and Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament,* Harvard Semitic Monographs IV (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 34–176.

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

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

to the north of Ugarit.[74] In like manner Yahweh's sanctuary is on a mountain (Mount Zion), which is located in the "heights of the north," the יַרְכְתֵי צָפוֹן (Ps. 48:1–2).[75] The "height of Zion" is a "well-watered garden" (Jer. 31:12; cf. Isa. 33:20–22), and in Ezekiel 28:13–16, the terms "mountain of God" and "garden of God" (not to mention Eden) are parallel. The mountain of Yahweh is also called the הַר מוֹעֵד ("mount of assembly"), again located in the "heights of the north/Saphon" (Isa. 14:13). The Ugaritic "domed tent," of course, evokes the imagery of the tabernacle.[76]

OBJECTIONS TO THE REALITY OF A DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Some interpreters argue against the idea that the אלהים of Psalm 82:1b and 6a are heavenly beings by introducing Exodus 4:16 ("And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God [אלהים]") and 7:1 ("And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god [אלהים] to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet," KJV).

Since Moses is referred to as אלהים, the argument goes, the אלהים of Psalm 82:1b and 6a also refer to human beings. While it is true that Moses is referred to as an אלהים (Exod. 4:16; 7:1), why must אלהים refer to a human being in Psalm 82? As discussed, structural elements and parallelism of that psalm argue against this conclusion, as does the logic of verse 6, as well as other passages that refer to plural אלהים.[77]

The reason Moses is called אלהים in Exodus 4:16 and 7:1 is that he was functioning similar to the way a member of God's council would function. Moses was not a mere messenger (he is not referred to as a מַלְאָךְ). Unlike prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, who were commissioned in the presence of Yahweh's council, Moses

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74 Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain,* 34–160.

75 In addition שַׁדַּי (Shadday) may mean "mountain dweller" (Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 581; and Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 48–60).

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

77 For example Psalms 89:6–7 ("For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings [בבני אלים]? In the council of the holy ones [בסוד קדשים] God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him," NIV); 29:1–2 ("Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones [אלים], ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness," NIV); and Isaiah 24:21, which clearly distinguishes human rulers from the council of אלהים ("In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below," NIV). The only powers in heaven besides Yahweh are the אלהים and the divine council.

regularly spoke to Yahweh "face to face." Moreover, his task went well beyond dispensing revelation; he was a *governing mediator*, effectively ruling Israel at God's behest. This governing at God's discretion marks him as an אלהים, much in the way that Israel's king was called a "son of אלהים" (Ps. 2:7; see also 110:3 in the Septuagint). Whether addressing Pharaoh or his own people, Moses as אלהים displayed divine authority.

A second objection to the divine council and its אלהים is that Isaiah 40:18–20; 41:5–7; 44:9–20; 46:5–7 denounce idols and forcefully contend that there are no other gods besides Yahweh. Such claims are also present in Deuteronomy 32 itself (vv. 15–18, 21). Since the Scriptures do not contradict themselves, the presence of such passages, particularly when juxtaposed with references to the heavenly council in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and 43, do not mitigate against the existence of the אלהים, but actually assume their reality to make the point of the comparison. Nevertheless how are these statements to be reconciled with the reality of the divine council?

Simply stated, these passages assert that there is no other *Deity* besides Yahweh. He is the only true God; all the other אלהים have contingent existence and power, were created, and are not omnipotent or omniscient.

For example in Isaiah 40:12–24 the prophet mocked the idols and their feebleness in comparison to Yahweh, and then wrote, "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: *Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name.* Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing" (vv. 25–26, NIV; italics added).

Elsewhere אלהים are referred to as "the starry host" (Deut. 4:19; Job 38:7; Isa. 14:13). In Isaiah 40, after asking what heavenly being compares to Him, Yahweh answered His own question by saying that He created these "stars," and they are therefore subject to Him and "line up at His command." It would be nonsensical for the Lord to claim to have created them and then to command entities that do not in fact exist. The juxtaposition of passages like this one with the proclamation that there is only one true God demonstrates that the reality of a divine council of אלהים is in no way incompatible with monotheism.

THE DIVINE COUNCIL AS AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT AND DEUTERONOMY 32:8

As noted, Old Testament passages and comparative linguistic data show that the Hebrew Bible includes the concept of a divine as-

sembly that is undeniably analogous to that at Ugarit (not to mention other ancient Near Eastern civilizations). So there is no need in Deuteronomy 32:8 to opt for the Masoretic reading of "sons of Israel" over "sons of God," which is attested in the Septuagint and 4QDeut^q and 4QDeut^j. In fact the "sons of God" reading makes much better sense in light of biblical history and Old Testament theology, especially that of Deuteronomy. The same cannot be said for the Masoretic reading.

THE NATIONS GIVEN UP

Accepting the Masoretic reading in Deuteronomy 32:8 ("he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of Israel") along with the correlation of that verse with Genesis 10–11 results in logical problems. As Tigay notes, "This reading raises a number of difficulties. Why would God base the number of nations on the number of Israelites? . . . Why would He have based the division on their number at the time they went to Egypt, an event not mentioned in the poem? In addition, verse 9, which states that God's portion was Israel, implies a contrast: Israel was God's share while the other peoples were somebody else's share, but verse 8 fails to note whose share they were."[78]

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

The statement in Deuteronomy 32:9 that "the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance" (NIV) provides the key for understanding the contrast between verses 8 and 9. Since verse 9 clearly presents the nation of Israel (here called "Jacob") as an allotted inheritance, the parallelism in the Masoretic text would re-

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[78] Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* 302.

quire the "nations" of verse 8 to be given as an inheritance as well.[79] Hence the point of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 is *not* merely that God created seventy territorial units after Babel, but that each of these units *was given* as an inheritance. The question is, To whom were the nations given? This is left unstated in verse 8a, but verse 8b, provides the answer. The parallel makes sense only if the original reading of verse 8b included a reference to other beings (the "sons of God") to whom the other nations could be given. The point of verses 8–9 is that sometime after God separated the people of the earth at Babel and established where on the earth they were to be located, He then assigned each of the seventy nations to the fallen sons of God (who were also seventy in number).[80] After observing humanity's rebellion before the Flood and then again in the Babel incident, God decided to desist in His efforts to work directly with humanity. In an action reminiscent of Romans 1, God "gave humanity up" to their persistent resistance to obeying Him. God's new approach was to create a unique nation, Israel, for Himself, as recorded in the very next chapter of Genesis with the call of Abraham (Gen. 12). Hence each pagan nation was overseen by a being of inferior status to Yahweh, but Israel would be tended to by the "God of gods," the "Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:17).

According to Deuteronomy 4:19 this "giving up" of the nations was a punitive act. Rather than electing them to a special relationship to Himself, God gave these nations up to the idolatry (of which Babel was symptomatic) in which they willfully persisted. Seeing these two passages together demonstrates this relationship. "And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven" (Deut. 4:19, RSV).[81] "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. For

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[79]   The Masoretic reading of this verse implies that the nations of the earth inherited a certain amount of property at God's hand, namely, their own lands, with the translation "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance" (NIV). However, it seems preferable to view the verse as saying that the nations themselves *were given* as an inheritance, with the rendering, "When the Most High gave the nations as an inheritance." Examples of the latter sense are in Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Joshua 1:6; 1 Samuel 2:8; Proverbs 8:21; and Zechariah 8:12.

[80]   As noted earlier, at Ugarit there were seventy sons of El (*KTU* 1.4:VI.46). The sons of God are referred to here as "fallen" in light of Genesis 6 as well as Deuteronomy 4:19.

[81]   The same verb "allotted" (חָלַק) is used in Deuteronomy 4:19 as well as in 32:8.

the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance" (32:8–9; author's translation, following the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls).

Tigay notes that these passages "seem to reflect a biblical view that . . . as punishment for man's repeated spurning of His authority in primordial times (Gen. 3–11), God deprived mankind at large of true knowledge of Himself and ordained that it should worship idols and subordinate celestial beings. . . . He selected Abraham and his descendants as the objects of His personal attention to create a model nation."[82]

THE DIVINE COUNCIL AND ISRAELITE MONOTHEISM

If a divine council does not exist, verses like Psalms 29:1 and 89:6–7 are eviscerated of meaning. "Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the gods [בני אלים], ascribe to the LORD glory and strength" (Ps. 29:1). "For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the sons of the gods [בבני אלים]? In the council of the holy ones [בסוד־קדשים] God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him" (89:6–7).

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

How can it be maintained that the Old Testament espouses monotheism when its authors continued to use the terms אלהים and אלים and "the sons of" אלהים and אלים in reference to nonhuman figures? The solution to this apparent impasse is relatively simple, but requires an adjustment in both the way the English word "God" is defined and how one understands the data of the Old Testament. Making such adaptations will show the uniqueness of Israel's religion in the ancient Near East.

First, hesitation to embrace the details of the divine council stems from habitually viewing the Old Testament through western eyes. Many Christians have been so conditioned by their concept of the word "God"—who is omnipotent, self-existent, omniscient, omnipresent, and possessing ultimate creative power—that they as-

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[82] Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* 435. The same idea contained in these verses also seems to be the point of Zephaniah 3:9 ("For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent"). David was certainly familiar with this idea, as his incensed tone in 1 Samuel 26:19 indicates: "Now let my lord the king listen to his servant's words. If the LORD has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, men have done it, may they be cursed before the LORD! They have now driven me from my share in the LORD's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods'" (NIV).

sume the unreality of any entity but one referred to by that word. Would the ancient Semitic mind have defined "God" as westerners do, and then made the same assumption? As already noted, even Isaiah, famous for his diatribes against pagan worship, used language and imagery analogous to depictions of the divine council in other places in the Old Testament and outside it. Isaiah simultaneously affirmed the existence of other heavenly beings and the one true Deity of Israel.

Unfortunately the ancient Near Eastern religious systems have been referred to as "polytheistic" with the assumption that *the ancient Semites* believed that *all* nonhuman entities bearing the label אלהים must have been omnipotent, self-existent, omniscient, omnipresent, and possessing ultimate creative power. As a result current observers often fail to recognize that the ancients in fact understood that the various אלהים existed in a hierarchy and with differing attributes.

The authors of the Old Testament, however, affirmed the existence of plural אלהים, while they also asked, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?" (Exod. 15:11; cf. Pss. 86:8; 138:1), *precisely because they already knew* that Yahweh is an אלהים, but that only He is omnipotent, preexistent, and omniscient. It was no conundrum for the people of Israel to affirm that the word אלהים in their language described actual beings that Yahweh had *created,* who were members of His council, while knowing that none of these אלהים were truly comparable to Him. In fact they could not deny the existence of other אלהים since Yahweh had created them! Whereas other ancient Near Eastern religions showed only glimpses of the monotheistic idea,[83] Israel alone was consistent in holding to monotheism. There is no need to create wholly interpretive, camouflaged translations,[84] or to interpret אלהים as human "judges," an approach that requires either paying only lip service to an Old Testament hermeneutic that incorporates comparative philology or

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[83] As discussions of the pantheons and the phenomenon of the divine council demonstrate, all ancient Near Eastern religions divided their gods into "noncouncil" and "council" groups, the latter forming the "upper tier" of those beings who inhabited the heavenly realms. The fact that there exists evidence in Mesopotamia for monotheistic ideology, and that at least one Egyptian "theology" (the Memphite theology) presents one god as supreme creator of all the others shows that one must not superimpose the exclusivity of the attributes of Yahweh to other אלהים, nor should one assume the ancients were incapable of the same distinction. With respect to Mesopotamia in this regard see Johannes Hehn, *Die Biblische und die babylonische Gottesidee* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913); and Bruno Baentsch, *Altorientalischer und israelitischer Monotheismus* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1906).

[84] For example, the New International Version translates Psalm 29:1, "Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones [בני אלים], ascribe to the LORD glory and strength."

jettisoning the analogous material altogether.

Second, it is hardly necessary to balk at affirming the reality of the divine council, for the Old Testament's presentation of the concept is distinguished from the pagan understanding. Aside from uncontradicted assertions that none of the אלהים were comparable to Yahweh, the description of the divine council in the Old Testament departs from that of other ancient Near Eastern religions in several important ways.

For example Yahweh is clearly depicted as the sole Deity credited with bringing all that exists into being. He was unassisted in His creative acts.[85] None of the other אלהים aided Him in this endeavor. An equally radical departure from the ancient pagan mind is the absence of any hint of theogony in the Old Testament. God produced the אלהים and everything else without a consort. Yahweh's "fatherhood" of the אלהים can only be spoken of in formal terms. Also the members of the divine council, contrary to ancient Near Eastern religions, cannot be viewed as genuine rivals to the Most High. Yahweh does not need to battle them in order to maintain His position as Leader of the council and hence the cosmos. There are no mighty deeds ascribed to any other than Yahweh. Yahweh is unchallenged and in fact unchallengeable.

CONCLUSION

This article responds to the false notion that accepting the Septuagint and Qumran evidence for the "sons of God" reading in Deuteronomy 32:8 requires seeing Israelite religion as polytheistic. In an effort to demonstrate that this conclusion is unfounded two assertions were offered and defended. First, the textual evidence favors the "sons of God" reading, particularly when common misunderstandings of text-critical history and method utilized to favor the Masoretic text are corrected. Second, the concept of the divine council, common to ancient Semitic religions, is referred to in the Old Testament and constitutes the theological backdrop for Deuteronomy 32:8–9. In light of the evidence there exists no textual or theological justification for preferring the Masoretic reading of verse 8. That verse should read "sons of God," not "sons of Israel."

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