

“Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?
Toward an Honest (and Orthodox) Assessment of
Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible”

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I. Introduction

Critical scholars of Israelite religion have long pointed out that the Hebrew Bible contains a number of references assuming and even affirming the existence of other gods. They also frequently assert that no explicit denial of the existence of other gods occurs until the time of (Deutero-) Isaiah and after (6th century B.C.) in some presumed campaign by zealous scribes to expunge such references from the sacred text.¹ Even the *Shema* and the first commandment do not consign the other gods to fantasy. The data, we are told, informs us that Israelite religion evolved from polytheism to henotheistic monolatry to monotheism. Evangelical forays into the problem of divine plurality and monotheism have been few. In most cases contributions have been peripheral, focusing on how multiple names of God do not point to polytheism and how the nature of Israelite religion in the patriarchal era should not be understood on the basis of source-critical assumptions with respect to the Pentateuch. It almost appears that evangelicals are not aware of a fundamental problem for its students who venture into the world of Semitics. For example, a magisterial work on the doctrine of God like Feinberg’s *No One Like Him* devotes less than a page to the matter of monotheism, as though there were no canonical texts that suggest an Israelite pantheon or rogue deities that are regarded as real beings. A rare exception is the work of Dan Block, but his valuable book, *The Gods of the Nations*, more describes aspects of the Old Testament worldview than solves the problem of whether the Hebrew Bible affirms the existence of other gods.

My own impression after naively (but happily) traversing the terrain of Israelite religion as a specialization, is that the problem is disturbing and therefore simply avoided. And so we’re caught between critical scholars who say too much, and evangelicals who say too little. I’d like to bring the issue front and center in this paper. For the record, I view the critical position as a wonderful example of circular reasoning. However, it is equally flawed for evangelicals to assume that the affirmations of the existence of other gods refer only to idols and idol worship. Yahweh does not preside over a group of idols, and he is no idol maker. This paper argues that evangelicals need not be driven to choose between the Scylla of liberal conclusions about a presumed evolution toward monotheism for Israel’s religion and the Charybdis of arguing the text can’t mean what it plainly says. There is a better solution.

II. The Reality of Other Gods in the Hebrew Bible

Psalm 82

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible assumes and affirms the existence of other gods. The textbook passage is Psalm 82. Verse one of that Psalm reads:

אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֹת־אֵל בְּקִרְבֹּת אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט:

God stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he passes judgment.

¹ Please note that in this paper I use the term “Deutero-Isaiah” when that term is used by others. I am not persuaded that there were two (or three) “Isaiahs.” I believe the work of Isaiah the prophet was edited and reworked by his followers and later scribes seeking to apply his teachings to their own historical context.

The first אֱלֹהִים is obviously singular due to subject-verb agreement. The second אֱלֹהִים is obviously plural due to the preposition בְּקִרְבּוֹ, since God cannot be said to be standing *in the midst* of a (singular) god or Himself. The Trinity is ruled out immediately because the gods over whom Yahweh presides are here being sentenced to die for their corrupt rule of people on the earth.

Critical scholars look to Psalm 82 as either a vestige of polytheism overlooked by monotheistic redactors, or perhaps a deliberate rhetorical use of Israel's polytheistic past to declare the new outlook of monotheism.² After the exile, so we are told, the gods of the nations are relegated to the status of angels. These proposals were part of the focus of my dissertation, and they fail on a number of levels.³

Concerning the former, it is evasive to appeal to bungling redactors when one's theory of a campaign to stamp out polytheistic texts doesn't work, especially when Psalm 82 is by no means the only text evincing divine plurality and a divine council "missed" by scribes. It is a demonstrable fact that there are clear references to gods and a divine council in Second Temple period Jewish literature. In the Qumran sectarian material alone there are approximately 185 occurrences of אֱלֹהִים, הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, אֱלִים, אֱלִים, אֱלִים (בְּנֵי אֱלִים, אֱלִים, אֱלִים) in contexts where a divine council is mentioned with the same vocabulary (קָהָל, סוּד, עֵדָה) utilized in texts of the Hebrew Bible for a divine assembly.⁴ If there was a campaign to allegedly correct ancient texts and their polytheistic views, the post-exilic Jewish community either didn't get the message or ignored it. The presumption of an evolution from polytheism to monotheism is so entrenched in critical scholarship that scholars like Carol Newsom in her work on the Qumran *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* coin oxymoronic terms like "angelic *elim*" to explain the material.⁵ It is more coherent to abandon the evolutionary paradigm and ask how it was that (1) late biblical authors had no qualms about an assembly of gods under Yahweh; and (2) Second Temple Jews, willing to suffer death rather than worship other gods, failed to react to divine council texts in the Hebrew Bible as a threat to monotheism. More on these questions and their implications momentarily.

Concerning the latter position, that polytheism is being used rhetorically, much is made of the last verse of Psalm 82, where God is asked to rise up and possess the nations (82:8). This is interpreted as a new idea of the psalmist to encourage the exilic community—that, despite exile, Yahweh will rise up and take the nations as his own having sentenced the other gods to death. This view ignores pre-exilic passages like Psalm 29, where Yahweh "has been enthroned as king forever" (Ps 24:7-10; 29:10). Psalm 24 and 29 have long been recognized as very ancient, and so the idea of Yahweh's universal kingship is not a development of the exile. As F. M. Cross notes: "The kingship of the gods is a common theme in early Mesopotamian and Canaanite epics. The common scholarly position that the concept of Yahweh as reigning or king is a relatively late development in Israelite thought seems untenable."⁶

As we turn to evangelical responses to Psalm 82, we need to bring verses 6-7 into the discussion:

² See for example, Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford, 2003); S. B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God – Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995): 532-559.

³ Michael S. Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004. If you would like a copy of my dissertation, I will gladly email it you for free as a PDF file. Contact me at mheiser@logos.com. I would also appreciate feedback about this paper.

⁴ For these references and a discussion of the divine council in Qumran material, see Heiser, "The Divine Council," 176-213.

⁵ Carol A. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. A Critical Edition* (HSM 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 23-24.

⁶ Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975; repr. Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 45, n. 59.

אֲנִי־אֶמְרָתִי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן כְּלֶכֶם: 6
 אֲכֹן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְלוּ: 7

6 'I said, 'you [pl] are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you [pl]'. 7 Therefore you [pl] shall die as humans do, and you [pl] shall fall as one of the princes.

In verse six, the plural אֱלֹהִים of 82:1 are referred to once again as אֱלֹהִים but are further identified as sons of God—sons of the Most High. It is well known that the phrases בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, and בְּנֵי אֱלִים have certifiable linguistic counterparts in Ugaritic texts to a council of gods under El, and that the meaning of these phrases in the Hebrew Bible points to divine beings.⁷ Critical scholars generally view this as evidence for vestigial polytheism, and more specifically they assert the history of this Psalm and other passages suggests that Yahweh was a son of El.⁸ Our concern today is with evangelical responses.

Evangelicals have commonly argued that similar phrases, such as references to Moses as אֱלֹהִים (Exo. 4:16; 7:1), Israel as Yahweh's "son" (Exo. 4:23; Hos. 11:1) and Israelites as "sons of the living God" (Hos. 1:10 [Heb., 2:1]) inform us that the אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82 are human rulers, namely the elders of Israel. This position is incoherent for several reasons. First, if these אֱלֹהִים are humans, why are they sentenced to die "like humans"? This sounds as awkward as sentencing a child to grow up, or a dog to bark. The point of verse 6 is that, in response to their corruption, the אֱלֹהִים will be stripped of their immortality at God's discretion and die like humans die. A clear contrast is intended by both the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text, saving us from such awkward logic.⁹ Second, what is the

⁷ There are several general phrases for a council of gods that provide a conceptual parallel with the Hebrew Bible: *phr ʿilm* - "the assembly of El/ the gods" (Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, "phr," *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* 2:669; *KTU* 1.47:29, 1.118:28, 1.148:9 [hereafter, *DULAT*]); *phr bn ʿilm* - "the assembly of the sons of El/ the gods" (*DULAT* 2:669; *KTU* 1.4.III:14); *phr kkbm* - "the assembly of the stars" (*DULAT* 2:670; *KTU* 1.10.I:4; the phrase is parallel to *bn ʿil* in the same text; see Job 38:7-8); *mphrt bn ʿil* - "the assembly of the gods" (*DULAT* 2:566; see *KTU* 1.65:3; cf. 1.40:25, 42 along with *bn ʿil* in 1.40:33, 41 and its reconstruction in parallel lines in the same text - lines 7, 16, 24; 1.62:7; 1.123:15). Of closer linguistic relationship to material in the Hebrew Bible are: *dt ʿilm* - "assembly of El / the gods" (*DULAT* 1:152; see *KTU* 1.15.II: 7, 11); *dr ʿil* - "assembly (circle) of El" (*DULAT* 1:279-280. See *KTU* 1.15.III:19; 1.39:7; 1.162:16; 1.87:18); *dr bn ʿil* - "assembly (circle) of the sons of El" (*DULAT* 1:279-280; see *KTU* 1.40:25, 33-34); *dr dt šmm* - "assembly (circle) of those of heaven" (*DULAT* 1:279-280; see *KTU* 1.10.I: 3, 5); *dr ʿil wphr b ʿl* - "the assembly (circle) of El and the assembly of Baal" (*DULAT* 1:279-280; see *KTU* 1.39:7; 1.62:16; 1.87:18). This list hardly exhausts the parallels between the dwelling place of El, which served as the meeting place of the divine council at Ugarit, and the abode of Yahweh. For the other linguistic parallels for each council and their respective modes of operation, see Heiser, "The Divine Council," 39-69. For other works that overview the divine council and the sons of God, see Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *ZAW* 76 (1964): 22-47; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 24; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980); idem, "Assembly, Divine," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (6 vols.; Doubleday, 1992), 2:214-217; S. B. Parker, "Sons of (the) God(s)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, ed. K. van der Toorn et al., (2nd extensively rev. ed.; Leiden; Boston; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 794-799 [hereafter, *DDD*]; idem, "Council (סוּד)," *DDD*, 204-208; Matitihu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," *HUCA* 40-41 (1969-1970): 123-137; J. Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 14 (1939): 29-126.

⁸ For a summary and critique of the view that Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32 have Yahweh and El as separate deities, and that the former is a son of the latter, see Heiser, "The Divine Council," 76-89. This view is propounded most recently by Simon B. Parker and Mark S. Smith.

⁹ 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," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 51-66; Cyrus Gordon, "אֱלֹהִים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *JBL* 54 (1935): 139-44.

scriptural basis for the idea that this psalm has God presiding over a council of *humans* that governs the nations of the earth? At no time in the Hebrew Bible did Israel's elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations of the earth. In fact, other divine council texts such as Deut. 32:8-9 have the situation exactly opposite—Israel was *separated* from the nations to be God's own possession and focus of his rule. Third, why would the corrupt decisions of a group of humans shake the foundations of the earth (v. 5)? The statement of Psalm 82:5 is comprehensible if the council in question were composed of cosmic beings whose sphere of authority went beyond a human Sanhedrin.¹⁰

It is also worth pointing out that one cannot argue that the references to the gods / sons of God outside Psalm 82 speak of humans. Job 38:7-8 has the sons of God present at the creation of the world, rendering a human interpretation impossible. The same can be said for Psalm 89:5-7 (Hebrew, vv. 6-8), where the sons of God of the council are *in heaven in the throne room of God*, not on earth. Likewise the Hebrew text of Psalm 29 is filled with parallels to Canaanite texts and religion, all of which point to an assembly of heavenly beings.¹¹ Other ancient parallels to Genesis 6:1-4 also compel the view that divine beings are in view, but that passage, like Psalm 82, is predominantly considered by evangelicals to speak of humans since the alternative allegedly smacks of polytheistic mythology.

The real problem with the human view of Psalm 82, however, is that this view cannot be reconciled with the passages that form the conceptual backdrop to Psalm 82. That is, the idea that the sons of God were supposed to be ruling the nations comes from somewhere, namely Deuteronomy 4 and 32. Those chapters clearly speak of an act of God to divide the nations of the earth among the sons of God as a punishment for rebellion *before there ever was a nation of Israel*. As a result, the idea that the elders of Israel are the backdrop for the council of Psalm 82 cannot be sustained. This necessitates that we turn our attention to the appropriate passages in Deuteronomy. These texts and the worldview that derives from them help us to properly understand Psalm 82 and the “problem” of Israelite monotheism.

¹⁰ There are specific reasons why human beings and God's chosen nation Israel are referred to as God's children in the aforementioned verses. The subject is too far-reaching for this paper. Briefly, given that the descriptions of Eden match well known motifs for the divine council dwelling of El at Ugarit (e.g., a well-watered mountain; cp. Ezekiel 28:13-14 with Genesis 2:8-14), Eden was the place where God “lived” and where the council of Yahweh met. Yahweh decreed that human beings would be set in authority over this place as his imagers (taking the prefixed preposition in *בְּצַלְמֵנוּ* in Gen. 1:26 as the *beth essentiae*). They were his children, and would rule over his household as his children. Note that humans and the divine beings of Job 38:7 thus share Yahweh as Father. The Fall corrupted the original plan. When Yahweh divided the nations, choosing Israel as his own possession, Israel became his child and the inheritor of the original intent that human beings would serve as his children. Thus began the restoration of the rule of God on earth through God's human family. The structure of Israel's eventual ruling administration (Moses [as “lead *elohim* on earth” – God's human vice-regent at the time] + 12 princes + 70 elders + everyone else in the royal household) mimics the divine council hierarchy, which is consistently portrayed in Ugaritic literature and the Hebrew Bible in both bureaucratic and familial terms. Though exiled (Hosea 1:10), at some point in the future, Israel would again be the sons of the living God. The Church inherits these promises (Gal. 3). Christians are “adopted” as “sons of God” (John 1:12; I John 3:1-3), will rule over angels (as the sons of God, over the lowest tier of the three tiered council, as it is in heaven; I Cor. 6:3;), and will be set over the nations as co-regents with Christ, the council head (Rev. 2:26; 3:21). Believers are the reconstituted family and divine council of God, joining the remaining divine sons of God loyal to Yahweh. This view is partially expressed in the Qumran belief that their community was the heavenly council on earth. The bibliography on these separate points is copious, though no one has synthesized the material. See R. J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 4; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); B. Byrne, “Sons of God”—“Seed of Abraham”: *A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul Against the Jewish Background* (Analecta biblica 83; Rome: Pontifical Institute Press, 1979); Harald Risenfeld, “Sons of God and Ecclesia: An Intertestamental Analysis,” in *Renewing the Judeo-Christian Wellsprings* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 89-104; James Tabor, “Firstborn of Many Brothers: A Pauline Notion of Apotheosis,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1984 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1984), 295-303; Devorah Dimant, “Men as Angels: The Self-Image of the Qumran Community” in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (Edited by Adele Berlin; Bethesda, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 93-103.

¹¹ F. M. Cross, Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 90-93.

Deuteronomy 4:19-20; 32:8-9 and Related Passages

A proper grasp of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is essential for contextualizing and comprehending both the worldview of Psalm 82 and the reality of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible. The correct text¹² reads:

בְּהִנְחֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יַצֵּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים :
כִּי תִלְקַ יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶבְלֵ נַחֲלָתוֹ :
8
9

8 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 God. 9 But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage

The event referred to in Deut. 32:8-9 hearkens back to events at the Tower of Babel, which occurred before the call of Abraham, and hence before Israel existed as a people. The statement in Deuteronomy 32:9 that “the Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance” provides the key for understanding the contrast between verses 8 and 9. In verse 9 the nation of Israel (here called “Jacob”) is described as Yahweh’s allotted inheritance. The parallelism requires the “nations” of verse 8 to be given as an inheritance as well, but to whom? 32:8b, provides the answer, but 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 other nations could not have been given to Israel since Israel did not yet exist. In a punitive decision reminiscent of Romans 1, God “gave humanity up” to their persistent resistance to taking him as their Sovereign. God subsequently called Israel into existence as His own. Hence each pagan nation was put under the administration of 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).¹³

While Deut. 32:8-9 described the nations being *given over* to gods¹⁴ who were not Yahweh, Deut. 4:19-20 gives us the opposite side of the punitive coin:

¹² As I noted in a 2001 article, there are no good text-critical reasons to read בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל with MT at the end of verse eight (Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BibSac* 158:629 [Jan. 2001]: 52-74 [esp. pp. 52-59]). The words אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים 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. Manuscript 4QDt^f has spaces for additional letters following the ל of its [בני אל]. Second, 4QDt^j clearly reads בני אלוהים. See *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 156; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518; P. W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut 32) from Qumran,” *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; Julie Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^d, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^f, 4QDt^g, 4QDt^h,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-79. Not only is the reading of MT text-critically inferior, but its content 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” (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 302).

¹³ Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8,” 71.

¹⁴ Deut 32:8a reads בְּהִנְחֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהִנְחֵל. בְּהִנְחֵל is pointed as a Hiphil infinitive absolute, but should probably be understood as a defective spelling of the infinitive construct: בְּהִנְחֵל (Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 154). The object of the infinitive form is גּוֹיִם. As Sanders notes, the Hiphil of the verb נָחַל can be “connected both with an *accusativus personae* (the inheriting person; hence, “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance”) or with an *accusativus rei* (the object inherited by this person; and so rendering, “When the Most High gave the nations as an inheritance”; Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 154. See Deut 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Josh 1:6; 1 Sam 2:8; Zech 8:12; and Prov 8:21 for other examples). Both options are syntactically possible, but which should be preferred? The answer is to be found in Deut 32:9: “Lo, the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance” (NIV). Since verse nine clearly presents the nation Jacob/Israel as

19 וּפְנֵי־תִשָּׂא עֵינֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַשׁ וְאֶת־הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶת־הַכּוֹכָבִים כֹּל צְבֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם
 וְגִדַּחְתָּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לָהֶם וְעַבַדְתָּם אֲשֶׁר חָלַק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲתָם לְכֹל הָעַמִּים תַּחַת
 כָּל־הַשָּׁמַיִם:
 20 וְאֲתַכֶּם לְקַח יְהוָה וַיּוֹצֵא אֶתְכֶם מִכּוּר הַבְּרֹזֶל מִמִּצְרַיִם לֵהֲיוֹת לוֹ לְעַם נַחְלָה בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

[Literal in places for emphasis]: 19 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, and be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, which the LORD your God has allotted to them, to all the peoples under the whole heaven. 20 But the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

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.”¹⁵ A fundamental part of the biblical worldview, then, is that Yahweh turned away from the nations of the earth, placed them under the rule of gods inferior to Himself (but gods nonetheless), and then elected Israel as His own following his anger at Babel.

III. Resistance to the Reality of Other Gods in the Israelite Worldview

Evangelicals have traditionally responded to passages indicating such divine plurality in two ways: (1) by asserting that the gods in these passages are merely idols; (2) by appealing to “denial statements” in Deuteronomy and Isaiah that have Yahweh saying there are no gods besides him. Both options create theological problems and are not internally consistent with the data. Recalcitrance to what the text seems to clearly state also makes the evangelical scholar an easy target for critical scholars, especially in light of the comparative Semitic material.

“The Gods of the Old Testament are only Idols”

Contrary to what many evangelical commentators have argued, presumably to avoid what they saw as polytheism, these passages do not refer to idols. The argument is made that this equation can be inferred from Deut. 4:15-18, where God through Moses warns His people to not make idols, lest they be turned aside to worship the sun, moon, stars, etc. Deuteronomy 32:17, however, refutes this argument:

Deut 32:17

יִזְבְּחוּ לִשְׂדֵיִם לֹא אֱלֹהִים לֹא יִדְעוּם חֲדָשִׁים מִקֶּרֶב בָּאוּ לֹא שְׁעָרוּם אֲבֹתֵיכֶם:

being taken as an allotted (חֶלֶק) inheritance—note the wordplay on both counts with the Hiphil verb in verse 8) by a divine personage (Yahweh), the parallelism of MT’s verse nine would require “nations” be given as an inheritance to the sons of God by the Most High.

¹⁵ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 435. The same idea contained in these verses also seems to be the point of 1 Samuel 26:19, quoting a distraught David: “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).

They sacrificed to demons who are not God (note the *singular* - אֱלֹהִים), (and to) gods they did not know; new gods that had along recently, whom your fathers had not revered.

Deut. 32:17 is frequently obscured in English translations, but it explicitly describes the divine beings introduced in 32:8-9 (and so 4:19-20) as אֱלֹהִים and שְׂדִים (“demons”).¹⁶ In other words, it is clear these are spiritual entities, not blocks of stone. Arguing that Moses meant idols in some parts of Deuteronomy 4 and 32 and not others is little more than special pleading.

Other passages from Deuteronomy make it clear that idols are not in view. In fact, this view results in unintentional blasphemy. The following verses are relevant:

Deuteronomy 17:2-3

כִּי־יִמְצָא בְקִרְבְּךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ אִשׁ או־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה
 אֶת־הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְעֵבֵר בְּרִיתוֹ:
 וְיִלְךְ וַיַּעֲבֹד אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לָהֶם וְלַשֶּׁמֶשׁ | אוֹ לַיָּרֵחַ אוֹ לְכָל־צַבָּא הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲשֶׁר
 לֹא־צִוִּיתִי:

2 If there is found among you, within any of your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant, 3 who has gone and served other gods and bowed down before them, the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden . . .

Deuteronomy 29:25

וַיִּלְכּוּ וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּם וְלֹא חָלַק לָהֶם:
 25 They turned to the service of other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not experienced and whom He [God] had not allotted to them.

It is clear that Deut. 17:2-3 and 29:25 refer back to the events described in Deut 4:19-20 and Deut 32:8-9. For our purposes, if Deut. 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 refer to idols and not the divine beings represented by idols, then we have God judging idols for badly administering the affairs of the nations. It would hardly be righteous judgment for Yahweh to sentence the other אֱלֹהִים to die like mortals if they were just doing what He told them to do. If they were fallen beings from the moment they received the nations at Babel, then Yahweh would have been putting certifiably corrupt beings into authority—something that would make his judgment of their corrupt oversight seem quite unjust. I would suggest that Psalm 82 implies that the אֱלֹהִים to whom the nations were given *became* corrupt—that something went wrong, and Yahweh was now judging them righteously. But there is a more significant problem. If the gods of these passages in Deuteronomy are idols, then Yahweh is an idol maker since he is credited with creating them.

This problem becomes more understandable when we look at the “sun, moon, and stars” terminology elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. While the Old Testament at times has biblical figures referring to idols as “gods”¹⁷—something inevitable given the behavior of the Gentile nations—it is *not* coherent to argue that the Old Testament writer *always* (or even mostly) meant “idols” when writing of plural אֱלֹהִים.

¹⁶ The language here—connecting the term שְׂדִים (“demons”) to the heavenly host and the other אֱלֹהִים takes us into the question of whether angels (and so demons) are gods (see footnote 22).

¹⁷ For example, I Kings 14:9. Such statements need to be balanced with others, such as II Kings 19:18.

Moreover, it is also unwarranted to argue that all the “heavenly host” terminology can only mean the chunks of rock and balls of gas in the cosmos.¹⁸

It is critical to note that this terminology is used of actual entities, not just astronomical bodies. It was commonly believed in the ancient world (Israelites included) that the heavenly bodies were either animate beings or were inhabited or controlled by animate beings.¹⁹ Hence in Scripture there is overlap with respect to just who or what is referred to by the terms “sun,” “moon,” “stars,” and “heavenly host.” However, an overlap is not an erasure of one element of the conception.

It is clear from the above passages in Deuteronomy that the sun, moon, and stars are explicitly referred to as “other gods” (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים), not as idols. This is also clear from passages like Job 38:4-7, where the sons of God are referred to as stars:

Job 38:4-7

אִיפֹה הִיִּיתַ בִּיסְדֵי־אָרֶץ הֶגֶד אִם־יִדְעַתָּ בִּינָה:	4
מִי־שָׂם מְמָדֶיהָ כִּי תִדַע אֹז מִי־נָטָה עָלֶיהָ קוֹ:	5
עַל־מָה אֲדָנִיהָ הִטְבְּעוּ אֹז מִי־יָרָה אָבֶן פִּנְתָּהּ:	6
בְּרוֹן־יַחַד כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר וַיִּרְעוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:	7

4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Job 38:7 has the phrases כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר and כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים in parallel. The language is similar to that of Isaiah 14, especially the rant from הִילַל בֶּן־שָׁחַר: “I will ascend to heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God/El” (מִמַּעַל לְכוֹכְבֵי־אֵל) (14:13).

The classic divine council passage, I Kings 22, also utilizes the heavenly host terminology for what are clearly divine beings:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְכֵן שָׁמַע דְּבַר־יְהוָה רָאִיתִי אֶת־יְהוָה יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסְאוֹ וְכָל־צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם עֹמְדֵי עָלָיו	19
מִימִינֹו וּמִשְׂמָאלֹו:	
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה מִי יַפְתֶּה אֶת־אַחָאָב וַיַּעַל וַיִּפֹּל בְּרַמֹּת גִּלְעָד וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה בָּכָה וְזֶה אָמַר בָּכָה:	20
וַיֵּצֵא הָרוּחַ וַיַּעֲמֵד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֶפְתָּנֹו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּמָה:	21
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶצָּא וְהִיִּיתִי רוּחַ שָׁקֶר בְּפִי כָּל־נְבִיאָיו וַיֹּאמֶר תִּפְתָּהּ וְגַם־תּוֹכֵל צָא וַעֲשֵׂה־כֵן:	22
וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה נָתַן יְהוָה רוּחַ שָׁקֶר בְּפִי כָּל־נְבִיאָיִךְ אֵלָה וַיְהוּה דְּבַר עֲלִיף רָעָה:	23

19 And he [Micaiah] said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left. 20 and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ 22 And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that this terminology *always* points to divine beings.

¹⁹ F. Lelli, “Stars,” *DDD*, 809-815; I. Zatelli, “Astrology and the Worship of the Stars in the Bible.” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 86-99.

out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' 23 Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you." (ESV)

The point here is that Yahweh is not holding council with physical chunks of stone and balls of gas. The text clearly equates the host of heaven with spiritual beings (one “comes forth,” “stands” before Yahweh, and speaks; v. 21):

Psalm 89:5-8 [Hebrew, 6-9] also associates the divine council and its members with the sky (שָׁחַק):

וְיִוְדוּ שָׁמַיִם פְּלֹאֵךְ יְהוָה אֶף־אֶמּוֹנֶתְךָ בְּקֶהֱל קְדָשִׁים: 6
 כִּי מִי בְשָׁחַק יַעֲרֹךְ לַיהוָה יְדֹמָה לַיהוָה בְּבָנֵי אֱלֹהִים: 7
 אֵל גָּעָרָן בְּסוּד־קְדָשִׁים רַבָּה וְנֹרָא עַל־כָּל־סְבִיבָיו: 8
 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת מִי־כַמוֹךָ חֲסִין יְהוָה וְאֶמּוֹנֶתְךָ סְבִיבוֹתֶיךָ: 9

5 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
 6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of God is like the LORD,
 7 a God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who surround him?
 8 O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithful ones all around you?

My contention that the celestial terminology in Deuteronomy 4 and 32 refers to actual divine beings and not idols is particularly important in view of passages like Nehemiah 9:6 and Psalm 148:1-5:

Nehemiah 9:6

אֲתָה־הוּא יְהוָה לְבַדְּךָ אַתָּה אֶתְּ עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם הָאָרֶץ 6
 וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הַיָּמִים וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וְאֲתָה מְחַיֶּה אֶת־כָּלֶם וּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם לְךָ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים:

6 You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, and all their host, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

Psalm 148:1-5

הַלְלוּ יְהוָה הַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם הַלְלוּהוּ²⁰ בַּמְרוֹמִים: 1
 הַלְלוּהוּ כָל־²¹ מַלְאָכָיו הַלְלוּהוּ כָל־צְבָאֵצְבָאָיו: 2

²⁰ The phrase “in the heights” (בַּמְרוֹמִים) has divine council overtones (see Norman C. Habel, "He Who Stretches Out the Heavens," *CBQ* 34:4 [1972]: 417-418; and Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 376-382).

²¹ There are a number of interesting items in this text. While verse 2 is an obvious instance of Hebrew parallelism, the nature of the parallel is not without debate. Most formulations of the bureaucracy within the divine council follow a three-tiered hierarchy of different classes or “species”: the High God, the lesser gods, and the angels (see Mullen, *The Divine Council*, 175-209; Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* [Eisenbrauns, 1994], 149-163; Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 41-54). At Ugarit, these three classes are distinguished, but the lower class, מַלְאָכִים, are on rare occasions also called gods. Those who hold to a three tiered council explain these instances as a “category transfer,” where the messengers are referred to as gods since they function as the proxy for the god who sent them. This verse raises the two-or-three tier issue since, to this point, the starry host language has been used of the sons of God, not מַלְאָכִים. Whether the lesser *elohim* are angels or separate classes cannot be fully developed here. Briefly, there are only two occasions in the Hebrew Bible where the term מַלְאָכִים occurs in proximity to one of the plural *elohim* terms

הַלְלוּהוּ שֶׁמֶשׁ וְיָרַח הַלְלוּהוּ כָּל-כּוֹכְבֵי אוֹר: 3
הַלְלוּהוּ שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל הַשָּׁמַיִם: 4
יְהַלְלוּ אֶת-שֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי הוּא צְוָה וְנִבְרָאוּ: 5

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! 3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created.

The parallelism makes clear the conceptual overlap in that it has the heavenly hosts—sun, moon, and stars—worshipping and praising Yahweh, their creator. If the heavenly host language used here elsewhere speaks only of idols and not divine beings, then Yahweh must be an idol maker, something theologically intolerable. The description is also point-for-point consistent with the broader ancient Near Eastern worldview that assumed the stars were animate beings.²²

To say this is merely poetic language that says nothing about the belief system of the writer or the ancient people at large cannot be sustained. Those familiar with conceptual metaphor know that metaphor or poetic expression is not based on what a person’s view of reality does *not* entail. Rather, the metaphor is a means of framing and categorizing something that *is* believed. Although it is not uncommonly expressed, I find little merit in the idea that one cannot draw theological content from poetic texts. One wonders as well what we could know about the beliefs of any of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations if we eliminated from consideration what we read in their poetic epics. Taking the Baal Cycle as a specific example, we could basically know nothing about the religion of Ugarit and Canaan if we took such an approach.

“Deuteronomy Denies there are Other Gods”

A second objection to the actual existence of other אֱלֹהִים in the biblical worldview is based on passages that denounce idols and forcefully contend that there are “no other gods besides Yahweh.” This view seems coherent until one realizes that these “denial phrases” occur in the same chapters of Deuteronomy that affirm other gods (Deut. 4 and 32). The same is true of the denial phrase in Isaiah, as will be noted momentarily.²³ Critical scholars argue that this phenomenon indicates either a merging of polytheistic and monotheistic traditions or blunders by the redactors when updating the older traditions to monotheism. Barring that conclusion, driven as it is by critical preconceptions about the evolution of

discussed in this paper. In both instances the overlap is placed in the mouth of a pagan, and so it is tenuous to draw conclusions about the biblical writers’ worldview on that evidence. The two examples are: (1) the interchange in Dan 3:25-28, where Nebuchadnezzar sees a fourth personage in the fiery furnace whose appearance he describes “as a son of the gods” in 3:25 (לְבַר-אֱלֹהִים) and an “angel” [“messenger” may be better here] in 3:28 (מַלְאָךְ). Scholars agree that, since these words are placed in the mouth of a foreigner, these descriptions cannot necessarily be taken as an articulation of Jewish religion. (2) In the story of Jacob’s dream (Gen 28:10-22), Jacob sees מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים (“angels of God”) descending and ascending the ziggurat, and also Yahweh at the top (or beside him, depending on how one takes the preposition + suffix in 28:13). However, in Gen. 35 when the incident is related again, we learn that God appeared to Jacob (35:1 - note the singular participle - לְאֵל הַנְּרָאָה אֱלֹהִים) and, six verses later, that the *gods* appeared to him as well (35:7 - note the rare plural verb form this time - נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים). One can draw two conclusions: (a) by merging the accounts, we get all three tiers of the council in the dream - Yahweh, the gods [from 35:7], and the angels of God; (b) angels are gods (“angels of God” of 28:12 = “the gods” of 35:7). One would still wonder, though, if “angels are gods, but not all gods are angels.”

²² See Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (Analecta biblica 39; Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1970).

²³ See Heiser, “The Divine Council,” chapters 4-6.

Israelite religion, we are either left with a glaring contradiction in the Hebrew Bible or the view that I will outline below.

The first issue before us is to determine whether the relevant denial phrases in Deuteronomy 4 and 32 actually deny the existence of other gods. We'll start with the statements in Deut. 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39.

Deut 4:35

אַתָּה הִרְאֵתָ לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבָדּוֹ:

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the* God (הָאֱלֹהִים); besides him there is no other.

Deut 4:39

וַיְדַעְתָּ הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתָּ אֶל-לִבְבְּךָ כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל-הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת
אֵין עוֹד:

Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (הָאֱלֹהִים) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

Deut 32:12

יְהוָה בַּדָּד יִנְחֵנוּ וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נָכַר:

The LORD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him.

Deut 32:39

רְאוּ | עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאַחִיָּה מַחְצֵתִי וְאֲנִי אֲרָפָא וְאֵין מִיֵּדִי
מְצִיל:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

With respect to Deut 4:35, 39, **יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים** is a simple verbless clause with the pronoun emphasizing the subject, but what does it mean that Yahweh is **הָאֱלֹהִים**? Is this a denial of the existence of other gods? How can that be reconciled with the presumption of other gods in these passages? It is at least equally probable from a linguistic perspective that the phrase means that Yahweh is superior or incomparable.²⁴ That is, Yahweh is *the* God par excellence, as Deut 10:17 states: **כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים** (“for the Lord our God, he is the God of the gods”). If the other gods to whom Yahweh is compared here do not exist in the mind of the writer, where is the praise in the statement? If one assumes Mosaic authorship for Deuteronomy, how could one coherently argue that Moses is even being honest in Deut. 10:17? Saying “the Lord is the God of all those beings I know don’t really exist” is dishonest. When Moses wrote “Lord, who is like you among the *elim*” did he really mean, “Lord who is like you among the imaginary beings that really aren’t there”? This is the modern equivalent of praising Yahweh by comparing him to a cartoon superhero or fictional literary figure. This devalues or even nullifies the praise. Even more fundamentally, why would the Holy Spirit inspire such nonsense?

²⁴ The same kind of situation is found in I Kings 18:21, a passage considered part of the Deuteronomistic history. Elijah challenges the crowd at Carmel, “If Yahweh is **הָאֱלֹהִים**, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” Yahweh’s status as **הָאֱלֹהִים** need not mean that Baal does not exist. It may mean “Yahweh is the unrivaled God (of Israel or in general).”

But what about the second half of the statements of Deut 4:35, 39— **אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ**? The phrase is usually translated, “there is no other (beside him),” and is taken by many scholars to be a denial of the existence of all other gods except Yahweh. There are a number of difficulties with this understanding.

First, similar constructions are used in reference to Babylon and Moab in Isa 47:8, 10 and Nineveh in Zeph 2:15. In Isa 47:8, 10 Babylon says to herself, **אֲנִי וְאֶפְסֵי עוֹד** (“I am, and there is none else beside me”). The claim is not that she is the only city in the world but that *she has no rival*. Nineveh makes the identical claim in Zeph 2:15 (**אֲנִי וְאֶפְסֵי עוֹד**). In these instances, these constructions cannot constitute the denial of the existence of other cities and nations. The point being made is very obviously incomparability.

Second, and before discussing the term’s negation, **מִלְּבַדּוֹ** and other related forms (**לְבַדּוֹ**, **לְבַד**) need not mean “alone” in some exclusive sense. That is, a single person in a group could be highlighted or focused upon. 1 Kgs 18:1-6 is an example. The passage deals with the end of the three-year drought and famine during the career of Elijah. After meeting with Elijah, Ahab calls Obadiah, the steward of his house, and together they decided upon a course of action to find grass to save their remaining horses and mules. After deciding between themselves which districts of the land to search (v. 6a), the text reads:

אַחֲרָאב הֵלֵךְ בְּדַרְךְ אֶחָד לְבַדּוֹ וְעַבְדֵּיהוּ הֵלֵךְ בְּדַרְךְ אַחֲד לְבַדּוֹ: (“Ahab went one way by himself [לְבַדּוֹ], and Obadiah went another way by himself [לְבַדּוֹ]”). While it may be possible to suggest that Obadiah literally went through the land completely unaccompanied in his search, it is preposterous to say that the king of Israel went completely alone to look for grass—without bodyguards or servants. The point is that **לְבַדּוֹ** (and by extension **מִלְּבַדּוֹ**) need not refer to complete isolation or solitary presence.

Another example is Psalm 51:4 [Hebrew, v. 6], which reads in part: **לְךָ לְבַדְּךָ חָטָאתִי** (“against you, you alone, I have sinned”). This is obviously heightened rhetoric designed to highlight the One who had been primarily offended, since David had sinned against his wife and certainly Uriah. It was God against whom David’s offense was “incomparable.”²⁵

Third, the negation of such “excluding prepositions” need not be construed as denials of existence. The construction can be some sort of incomparability statement. As Nathan McDonald notes in his recent work *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism,’* the only consideration of the negative particle **אֵין** followed by the adverb **עוֹד** with or without the subsequent preposition of excluding sense (**מִלְּבַד**, **אֶפְסֵי**) is that of H. Rechenmacher.²⁶ The first part of Rechenmacher’s study was a linguistic analysis of Hebrew verbless sentences with particles of negation. He concludes that analysis with an examination of prepositions and adverbs with an excluding sense, including those found in the verses from Deuteronomy

²⁵ There are other examples, but I will cite only two here. In Eccl. 7:29 Solomon states, “See, this alone (לְבַד) I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (ESV). Is that the only thought or conclusion Solomon ever drew in his life? In Judges 7:5 we read, “So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself [לְבַד]. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink’” (ESV). Are we to conclude that Gideon took all 300 men who passed this test and isolated them from each other? It is far more coherent to say they were set aside as a group. The point would be that the group of 300 was set aside *in comparison* to the rest of the soldiers.

²⁶ H. Rechenmacher, “*Außer mir gibt es keinen Gott!*” *Eine sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Studie zur Ausschließlichkeitsformel* (ATSAT 49; St. Ottilien, 1997).

and (Deutero-) Isaiah under consideration.²⁷ Rechenmacher argues that the examples in Deuteronomy 4 point to exclusivistic monotheism, but he fails to explain why the construction in these texts cannot be describing incomparability. It seems he did not make this connection because of prior assumptions about the evolution of Israelite religion brought to the data. McDonald points out several methodological problems with Rechenmacher's study that are beyond our time frame today.²⁸

For now we must also ask whether the negative particle **אין** + **עוד** requires non-existence (as opposed to incomparability) and whether similar combinations (**אפס עוד**) have the same range or restriction of meaning. The question is relevant to establishing an overlap with the denial phrases in Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah. Turning again to the negation passages listed above from Deuteronomy 32:

Deut 32:12

יְהוָה בַּדָּד יִנְחֵנוּ וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נָכַר:

The LORD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him.

Deut 32:39

רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי אֵל הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאֲחִיָּה מְחַצְתִּי וְאֲנִי אֲרַפָּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מְצִיל:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

It was noted earlier that Deut. 32:17 makes it quite clear that Moses is referring to divine beings and not astronomical bodies in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (and so in 4:19-20; 17:3; 29:25). Here we need to address the denial phrases in Deuteronomy 32 (namely the phrases **אין** **אֵל הוּא אֲנִי** followed by **אין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי**). The most thorough work on this phrase and similar phrases is that of C. H. Williams.²⁹ This study concludes that these are not statements of self-existence or divine interchangeability (translating, “I am the same”). The second line of Deut 32:39, **אין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי**, can either be understood as “there is no God like me,” which would not be a denial of the other gods’ existence, or “there is no god with me.” The latter would parallel Deut 32:12’s phrase, **אין עִמּוֹ אֵל נָכַר** (“there was no foreign god with him”), which means that Yahweh had no assistance (and needed none) in his deliverance of Israel, not that other

²⁷ Ibid., 97-114, cited in Nathan McDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism* (FAT 2, Reihe 1; Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 82.

²⁸ For instance, McDonald notes that, “Rechenmacher assumes, without argument, that **עוד** is exchangeable for a preposition with excluding function and personal suffix.” McDonald counters by observing that on two occasions (Deut 4:35; Isa 45:21), “**אין עוד**” occurs with an excluding prepositional construction . . . and such an exchange would create a tautologous expression.” Lastly, as McDonald and other scholars have noted, neither the usual temporal sense of adverbial **עוד** (“still, yet”) nor the conjunctive sense (“additionally, also, again”) fit Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:39. If one accepts the list provided in BDB for those texts where **עוד** does not have either of these meanings, one is left with seven occurrences of the adverb, all of which occur in questions or answers to questions. McDonald notes that “in each case, what is being questioned is not the absolute existence of an object, but only if there is an object in a person’s immediate domain. . . . In each of the questions what is being asked is whether the one being questioned has an additional [item or] member besides the ones already taken into account” (McDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 83-84).

²⁹ C. H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of ‘Ani Hū’ in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (WUNT II, 113, 2000) 39-52.

gods do not exist. These phrases do not amount to a denial of the existence of other gods. The claim is that Yahweh is unique and the only truly powerful God who can deliver Israel. He is incomparable.

Additionally, in the case of Deut 32:12, the notion that, "[T]he LORD alone (יְהוָה בְּדָד) did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him," cannot be accurately construed as a denial of the existence of other gods. In an Ugaritic text with parallel language Baal says: *ʿahdy d ymlk l ʿilm* ("I alone am the one who can be king over the gods").³⁰ This is certainly no statement for exclusivistic monotheism at Ugarit! The phrase points to incomparability—only Baal among all the other gods of the Ugaritic pantheon was El's vice regent. P. Sanders makes the same point in his monograph on Deut 32 when he states, "In colon 12aB the existence of other gods is not under discussion. The colon just says that YHWH was the only god who made an effort for Israel."³¹

With respect to Deut 32:39 Sanders adds, "On the basis of this colon alone it is difficult to decide if it is a claim for the absoluteness of Yahweh (i.e., the existence of other gods is denied), or the incomparability of Yahweh."³² The solution seems to lie in balancing the colon וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי ("there is no god besides me") with the phrase וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מִצִּיל ("there is none that can deliver out of my hand"). Hence a comparison is again being made: Yahweh's ability versus the ability of opposing gods. Sanders follows:

How do we translate עִמָּדִי? Theoretically 'with', 'beside', and 'like' are our options. In other parts of the song the existence of other gods is not denied but they are regarded as powerless; cf. v. 31, 37-38, 43a (4QDt^q). This circumstance seems to render the translation 'with' less convincing. It is the incomparability [of God] . . . that is confessed here. The phrase וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי must have virtually the same meaning as the far more common expression of YHWH's incomparability by the phrase . . . אֵין כּ. The possibility of translating עִם by 'like' is also suggested by some Ugaritic evidence. . . . In *KTU* 1.6:i.44-45 Ilu and Athiratu are comparing various candidates for Ba'alu's succession. Ilu rejects one of them, stating: *dq ʿanm l yrz m b l l y db mrh m bn dgn ktmsm* ("One of feeble strength cannot run **like** Ba'alu, one who knuckles down cannot poise the lance like the son of Daganu"; lines 50-52). Since at this moment Ba'alu is not among the living anymore, the translation 'with' is obviously unacceptable here. It has long been perceived that 'like' is the preferable translation.³³

The point above regarding the relationship between Yahweh's incomparability and his *uniqueness* is an important one. The fact that there is no deity who can save those whom Yahweh has targeted for judgment speaks to both aspects. This uniqueness in turn compels the confession that Yahweh alone is the "true" God (Jer 10:10). This is the heart of Israel's theology.

As one scholar recently noted in a work on the question of monotheism in Deuteronomy:

[T]he belief in one God is the central issue in the theology of Deuteronomy. In later times, the monotheistic statements of Deuteronomy (esp. 4:35, 39; 6:4; 7:9; 32:39) are used by

³⁰ *KTU* 1.4.vii.49-52.

³¹ Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 238.

³² *Ibid.*, 226.

³³ *Ibid.*, 238; cf. note 788. The boldface and underlining is mine. On the Ugaritic evidence, see also Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'alu According to the Version of Ilmilku* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer & Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), 203.

the monotheistic religions of Late Antiquity, Judaism and Christianity, to support their argument against those who did not believe in one God. . . . As far as the belief in one God is concerned, Deuteronomy is not concerned with a theoretical monotheism, but rather gives a confession of faith. The monotheism of Deuteronomy emerged from the struggle against *idolatry*. Moreover, the decline of Israel is attributed to the following of other gods. *The existence of other gods is not denied, however, only their power and significance for Israel.*³⁴

If one sees a link between the composition of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, the case for incomparability as opposed to denial becomes even stronger. The absence of any unmistakable denial of the existence of other gods in Deuteronomy and the Dtr literature is also bolstered by a study of the concept of alien deities in that material by Yair Hoffman.³⁵ Hoffman studied the occurrence and distribution of **אל זר, אלוהים נכר**, and **אלוהים אחרים** to discern whether Israel's faith reflected a monotheism that denied the existence of other gods, or if such phrases denoted only a difference in perspective ("they are *other* gods since they are not *ours*").³⁶

Based on the infrequent number of occurrences and their distribution, Hoffman concluded the first two phrases could not decisively answer the question. The third phrase, the most relevant to the study, resulted in more clarity. By way of summation, Hoffman found:

The qualifying phrase **אלוהים אחרים אשר לא ידעת** verifies that by the phrase **אלוהים אחרים** Dtr did not intend a conclusive denial of deities other than Yahweh. . . . I suggest that the creation of the expression **אלוהים אחרים** reflects Dtr's vague feeling that a term was needed which could express the dichotomy, though not absolute contradistinction, between Yahweh and all other gods. . . . The creation of a term was vital for the Dtr who wanted to contrast other deities with Yahweh not on the level of existence, but on the level of potency. . . . Thus the concept of "other gods" expressed by the term **אלוהים אחרים** is that they exist, they may even be "helpful" for their natural worshippers, but not for Israel, which can be helped only by Yahweh. Such a concept of other gods leads indirectly to the belief that Yahweh is mightier than the other gods, and therefore it is not only immoral but stupid for Israel to transgress his covenant. The concept of the sovereignty of Yahweh over all deities, though not his exclusiveness, and the idea that it is legitimate for each nation to worship its own gods, are well attested in Deut 4:19-20. Here Israel is warned not to worship the sun, the moon, and the stars, "whom the Lord has allotted (**חלק**) unto all nations under the whole world."³⁷

The confessional statements of Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 must be viewed against the backdrop of the Most High's dealings with the Gentile nations and the gods he appointed to govern them. It would be nonsensical to conclude that Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 have Yahweh giving the nations up to the governance of non-existent beings. The writer is not suggesting in turn that Yahweh allotted non-existent

³⁴ J. T. A. M. van Ruiten, "The Use of Deuteronomy 32:39 in Monotheistic Controversies in Rabbinic Literature," in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honor of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 223 (emphasis mine).

³⁵ Yair Hoffman, "The Concept of 'Other Gods' in Deuteronomistic Literature," in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature* (ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer; JSOTSup 171; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1994), 66-84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71. Emphasis is the author's.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

beings to the nations so as to explain why the nations outside Israel worship non-existent beings. The implication is that the declarations of Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 are best understood as reflecting a worldview that accepted the reality of other gods, along with Yahweh's utter uniqueness among them, not a worldview that denied the existence of lesser אֱלֹהִים.³⁸ The same picture emerges in Isaiah.

“Isaiah Denies There are other Gods”

If Deuteronomy's statements that “there is none beside” Yahweh do not amount to a denial of the existence of other gods, what about Isaiah's declarations? I would argue that Isaiah is consistent with Deuteronomy since the phrases in Isaiah on which scholars depend for arguing other gods do not exist are the same or similar to those just discussed in Deuteronomy 4 and 32. There is also solid evidence that Isaiah utilizes the worldview of Deuteronomy 4 and 32, as well as Psalm 82. If this be the case, then his alleged denials of the existence of other gods must be contextualized by his other statements and broader theology.

To begin, scholars of the book of Isaiah have long recognized the presence of the divine council in the book of Isaiah, particularly Isa 40:1-8.³⁹ Scholars have also taken note of the familiar mythological motifs in the book associated with Yahweh's assembly—the same sort of “star” language referring to divine beings noted in the discussion of Deuteronomy 4 and 32. For example, consider Isa. 40:22-26:

³⁸ This is not henotheism (see the ensuing discussion).

³⁹ See, for example, H. H. Rowley, “The Council of Yahweh,” *JTS* 45 (1944): 151-157; Kingsbury, “Prophets and the Council of Yahweh,” 279-286; Polley, “Hebrew Prophecy Within the Council of Yahweh,” 141-156; Christopher R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 109:2 (1990): 229-247; Frank Moore Cross, “The Council of Yahweh in Deutero-Isaiah,” *JNES* 12 (1953): 274-277; M. Nissinen, “Prophets in the Divine Council,” 4-19. Two features of Isa 40:1-8 demonstrate the presence of the divine council. First, there are several plural imperatives in verses 1 (נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ; “console”) 2 (דַּבְּרוּ . . . וְקִרְאוּ; “speak . . . and call”) and 3 (יִשְׂרוּ . . . פְּנֵוּ; “prepare . . . make straight”) as well as plural suffixes (v.1, אֱלֹהֵיכֶם [note the masculine 2pl] “your God”; v.3, לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ, “for our God”). The commands are issued to an unseen audience, and require actions that cannot be fulfilled by earthly addressees. Seitz and others have pointed out that interpreting עַמִּי as a vocative is ruled out by the parallel עַל-לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַם, which is clearly the intended object and not a vocative. On the addressees, see especially יִשְׂרוּ בְעֵרְבָה מְסֻלָּה and the ensuing description of this activity in verses 4-5. Second, there is an unequivocal alternation of speakers in verses 1-6. The speaker who issues the plural imperatives of verses 1-2 is presumably Yahweh (addressing his divine court), due to the fact that he refers to the inhabitants of Jerusalem as “my people,” and pronounces the sins of those people as having been pardoned. The speaker changes in verse 3, where a voice from the assembly who has just heard the instruction of Yahweh calls out (to plural addressees again) to make preparation for the arrival of Yahweh and his glory (v.5). This heavenly voice then addresses another personage with a singular imperative (v. 6a, . . . קוּל אָמַר קְרָא; “a voice said, ‘call . . .’”). The exchange is reminiscent of the council intercourse of Isaiah 6, a correlation often used as support for seeing Isa 40:1-8 as the call narrative of Deutero-Isaiah. Such a correlation is inconclusive, however, since Isa 40:1-8 may just as well have been composed to reference Isaiah 6 rather than to signal a change in prophetic voice. Seitz and other scholars argue that Isa 40:1-8 is not a call narrative due to its departures from the elements of that genre, namely the absence of the crucial elements of an acceptance of the charge and ensuing reassurance (Seitz, “Divine Council,” 238-246). Instead of a first person acceptance of the commission charge, such as is found in Isa 6:8 (“here am I, send me”), the objection to the singular imperative is not voiced by the prophetic author of Isaiah 40, but another angelic voice: “. . . and he said, what shall I say?” Seitz (234ff.) discusses the text-critical issues in identifying the questioner in terms of the third person or first person. The latter is reflected in the LXX and 1QIsa^a, which fact has been used to mark chapter 40 as a call narrative for Deutero-Isaiah. Seitz's discussion of the variant readings and the variants themselves have nothing to do with the issue of the divine council, only departures from genre. Both scholars who side with Seitz in agreeing that the departures from the call genre he notes are important and those who still see Isa 40:1-8 as a call accept the plural imperatives of Isa 40:1-8 as pointing to the heavenly host, Yahweh's council. If the first person verb is original, the divine council is still present in view of the plural imperatives in 40:1-2. The person of the verb affects only the potential identification of the herald

Isa 40:22-26

הַיִּשֵׁב עַל־חֹג הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁבֶּיהָ כַּחֲגָבִים הַנּוֹטָה כְּדֹק שָׁמַיִם וַיִּמְתַּחֵם כְּאֹהֶל לְשִׁבְתָּ: 22

הַנּוֹתֵן רוֹזְנִים לְאֵין שְׁפָטִי אֶרֶץ כִּתְהוּ עֲשֵׂה: 23

אִף בַּל־נִטְעוּ אִף בַּל־זָרְעוּ אִף בַּל־שִׂרְשׁ בְּאֶרֶץ גְּזֻעַם וְגַם־נִשְׁף בָּהֶם וַיִּבְשׂוּ וַיִּסְעָרָה כִּקֶּשׁ 24

תְּשִׂאִם:

וְאֶל־מִי תִדְמִינִי וְאֶשְׁוֶה יֹאמֶר קְדוֹשׁ: 25

שְׂאוּ־מַרְוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וְרֵאוּ מִי־בָרָא אֱלֹהֵ הַמוֹצִיָא בְּמִסְפָּר צְבָאִם לְכֹל־ם בְּשֵׁם יִקְרָא מֶרֶב אוֹנִים 26

וְאִמִּיץ כַּח אִישׁ לֹא נִעְדָּר:

22 (It is) he that sits / is enthroned upon the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants (are) as grasshoppers; he stretches out the heavens as a curtain, and spreads them out as a tent in which to dwell. 23 He brings princes to naught; the rulers of this world he makes as nothing. 24 No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. 25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. 26 Lift up your eyes to the heights and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.

This passage is intriguing on several levels. The reference to the “circle of the earth” (v. 22; חֹג הָאָרֶץ) and “stretching out (הַנּוֹטָה) the heavens as a tent (כְּאֹהֶל) in which to dwell” (v. 22) are overt references to the mythological dwelling of El.⁴⁰ Likewise the imperative to lift up the eyes “to the heights” (מַרְוֹם) in context with these references speaks of the dwelling of El, the place where the old council gods meet with the high God.

The wording of Isa 40:23 is of special interest: “He brings princes to naught; the rulers of this world he makes as nothing.” The word for “princes” here is not the familiar and expected שָׂרִים, but רוֹזְנִים, a word that it is certainly within the semantic range of *royal sons*.⁴¹ This becomes noteworthy once it is recalled that in Ugaritic religion *divine* royal sons bore the title *tpt*,⁴² the philological equivalent to שְׁפָט , the same term used in Psalm 82 for the gods who were judging (עַד־מַתִּי תִשְׁפֹּטוּ־עוֹלָם) the nations unjustly (cf. Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9). Benjamin Sommer, in his study of scriptural inter-textuality and allusions in Isaiah 40-66, observes that, “A number of themes in the pericope in Isaiah 40 restate those of Psalm 82.”⁴³ The passages share more than this single lexeme. Note the description of the gods of Psalm 82, the royal sons of the Most High, who judge the earth:

⁴⁰ Habel notes, “The heights of that horizon [*hūg*] are the cosmic North, the traditional mythological abode of the gods” (Habel, “He Who Stretches Out the Heavens,” 417-418). See also, Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*, 42-43, 126; Mullen, *Divine Council*, 195-198; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 36; Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 376-382.

⁴¹ The word רוֹזְנִים is a Qal masculine plural participle from רוֹזַן. The verb occurs elsewhere for royalty in Judg 5:3; Ps 2:2; Prov 8:15; 31:4; Hab 1:10.

⁴² Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*, 113; C. Gordon, “*tpt*,” *Ugaritic Textbook*; Wyatt, “Titles of the Ugaritic Storm God,” 422. Wyatt in particular notes that *tpt* may be taken as referring to “ruling” (*mlk*).

⁴³ Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 124.

Psalm 82:5-8

“Judge (שִׁפְטוּ) the poor and the orphaned; vindicate the afflicted and the needy. Rescue the poor and the destitute; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked. They don’t know, they don’t understand (לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יִבְיִנוּ). They go round and around in darkness – and all the foundations of the earth totter (יִמוּטוּ כָּל־מוֹסְדֵי אֲרֶץ). I said, ‘You are gods, you are all sons of Elyon.’ But in fact you will die like humans; you will fall like any of the princes. Rise up, O God, and judge the earth (תִּנְחַל בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם).”

Isa 40:17-23

“All the nations (כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם) are like nothing before Him. . . . To whom would you compare God, and what likeness would you set up in comparison to Him? . . . A skilled artificer seeks to establish for himself an idol that will not totter (לֹא יִמוּט). Don’t you know (הֲלוֹא תִדְעוּ)? Did you not hear? Was it not told to you from the beginning? Don’t you understand (הֲלוֹא הִבִּינְתֶם) the foundations of the earth (מוֹסְדוֹת הָאָרֶץ)? The one who sits enthroned above the vault of the earth so that its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens as a curtain, and spreads them out as a tent in which to dwell. He brings princes to naught; the rulers of the earth (שִׁפְטֵי אֲרֶץ) to nothing.”

The mythologically-charged language⁴⁴ in Isaiah’s text (“sits enthroned [הִיִּשֵׁב]⁴⁵ above the vault [חוּג]⁴⁶ of the earth”) is quite evident, and is particularly striking given Isaiah 40’s own heavenly divine council / divine herald scene. In reading Isaiah 40’s use of Psalm 82, Isaiah 40:22a is apparently referring to humans, but the rest of passage draws heavily on divine council motifs and vocabulary. The “princes” (or, reading רוֹזְנִים here against the Ugaritic term, the divine sons of Yahweh) are brought low. Isaiah taunts those who worship these lesser gods by making images of them (40:20) and declares that in the day of the Lord’s coming he will do away with the divine sons who abuse the nations; he will make these divine rulers as nothing.

It is clear that Isaiah does not have human rulers in view in 40:22b-26 on other counts. In 40:23 he draws on the language of Psalm 82 to describe the transitory nature of these judges (שִׁפְטֵי אֲרֶץ). Yahweh then asks, rhetorically, who can compare to himself. Isaiah then identifies the object of the comparison as those who are in “the heights” and gives Yahweh credit for creating “these.” The referents are the heavenly host, whom Yahweh “brings out by number, calling them all by name.” Isaiah 45:11-12 echoes the same thought.

To deny that Isaiah has the same “starry” sons of God in view here, one has to argue that the prophet is either referring to humans or literal astronomical bodies. It is difficult to argue the latter, since the result of that choice is that Isaiah is describing how God commands chunks of rock and balls of gas, whose response somehow affects events on earth—specifically the corrupt judgment of Psalm 82. To say the least, this smacks of astrology. The former approach requires ignoring the Ugaritic parallel and asserting

⁴⁴ The language occurs elsewhere in addition to the texts discussed here. See Isaiah 42:5; 44:24.

⁴⁵ See also Habel’s discussion of this vocabulary and motif: “The verb *yšb*, when applied to Yahweh, frequently means enthronement” (Habel, “He Who Stretches Out the Heavens,” 421).

⁴⁶ Cf. Habel once more: “The heights of that horizon [*hūg*] are the cosmic North, the traditional mythological abode of the gods” (Habel, “He Who Stretches Out the Heavens,” 421).

that Isaiah believed that the sons of the Most High in Psalm 82 were humans, leaving us to guess how he'd answer the problems associated with that view in that psalm we have already noted. This option also leaves us with Isaiah measuring God's incomparability on a comparison to either humans or literal chunks of rock and balls of gas. It is much more coherent to have Isaiah accepting the worldview of Psalm 82 as including a council lesser אֱלֹהִים who can in no way compare to Yahweh. This view doesn't get much time in either critical or evangelical circles, since so many scholars are committed to the idea that Isaiah denies the existence of other gods, albeit for different reasons.

It is against this backdrop and the larger scope of Deuteronomy that Isaiah's "none beside me" statements must be understood. Failure to do so leaves one with inner-biblical and logical contradictions. There are three primary passages to which scholars appeal to assert Isaiah denied the existence of other gods:

Isa 43:10-12

10 אַתֶּם עֵדֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְעַבְדֵי אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּי לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ וְתֵאמְרוּ לִי וְתִבְיֵנוּ כִּי־אֲנִי הוּא לְפָנַי
 10 לֹא־נֹצֵר אֵל וְאַחֲרַי לֹא יִהְיֶה:
 11 אָנֹכִי אָנֹכִי יְהוָה וְאֵין מִבְּלַעְדֵי מוֹשִׁיעַ:
 12 אָנֹכִי הִגַּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְאֲנִי־אֵל:

10 "You are my witnesses," declares Yahweh, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, neither shall there be after me. 11 I, I am Yahweh, and besides me there is no savior. 12 I declared and saved and I proclaimed, when there was no strange (god) among you: and you are my witnesses," says Yahweh, "that I am God."

Isa 44:6-8

6 כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגֵאֲלוֹ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֲנִי רִאשׁוֹן וְאֲנִי אַחֲרוֹן וּמִבְּלַעְדֵי אֵין אֱלֹהִים:
 7 וּמִי־כִמּוֹנִי יִקְרָא וְיִגִּידָהּ וְיַעֲרֹכָהּ לִי מִשׁוּמֵי עַם־עוֹלָם וְאַתִּיזוֹת וְאֲשֶׁר תִּבְאֲנָה יִגִּדוּ לְמוֹ:
 8 אַל־תִּפְחָדוּ וְאַל־תִּרְהוּ הֵלֹא מֵאֵז הִשְׁמַעְתִּיךָ וְהִגַּדְתִּי וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי הַיֵּשׁ אֵלֹוֹהַ מִבְּלַעְדֵי וְאֵין צוּר
 בְּלִי־יָדְעָתִי:

6 Thus says Yahweh the King of Israel, and its Redeemer, Yahweh who creates the hosts: "I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no god. 7 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let him declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things that are coming? Let them tell me what is yet to be. 8 Fear not, neither be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses. Is there a god beside me? There is no Rock; I know not any."

Isa 45:5-7, 14, 18, 21

5 אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד זּוֹלָתִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים אֲאֹזְרֶךָ וְלֹא יִדְעָתִנִּי:
 6 לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ מִמְזֶרֶח־שָׁמֶשׁ וּמִמְעַרְבָּה כִּי־אֶפֶס בְּלַעְדֵי אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד:
 7 יוֹצֵר אֹזֶר וּבּוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם וּבּוֹרֵא רָע אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה כָּל־אֵלֵה:

5 "I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides me there is no God beside me: I gird you, though you do not know me, 6 that men may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am Yahweh, and there is no other. 7 I form the light and create darkness; I make prosperity and create calamity: I Yahweh do all these things."

14 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה יִגִּיעַ מִצְרַיִם וּסְחָר־כּוֹשׁ וּסְבָאִים אֲנָשֵׁי מְדָה עָלֶיךָ יַעֲבְרוּ וְלָךְ יִהְיוּ אַחֲרֶיךָ יִלְכוּ
 14 בְּזִקִּים יַעֲבְרוּ וְאַלֶיךָ יִשְׁתַּחֲווּ אֵלֶיךָ יִתְפַּלְלוּ אַךְ בְּךָ אֵל וְאֵין עוֹד אֶפֶס אֱלֹהִים:

14 Thus says Yahweh: "The wealth of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; in chains they shall come over and fall

down before you; they shall make supplication to you, saying, 'God is with you only, and there is no other, there is no god besides him'."

18 כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יִצֵר הָאָרֶץ וְעָשָׂה הוּא כּוֹנֵנָהּ לֹא־תִהְיֶה בְּרָאָה לְשֶׁבֶת יִצְרָה אָנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד:

18 For thus says Yahweh, who created the heavens – he is God – who formed the earth and made it; he hath established it; he did not create it a chaos; he formed it to be inhabited. "I am Yahweh; and there is no other."

21 הַגִּידוּ וְהַגִּישׁוּ אֶף יוֹעֲצוּ יַחְדָּו מִי הַשְּׁמִיעַ זֹאת מִקֶּדֶם מֵאִז הַגִּידָה הֲלוֹא אָנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד אֱלֹהִים מִבְּלִעְדֵי אֵל־צַדִּיק וּמוֹשִׁיעַ אֵין זוֹלָתִי:

21 "Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, Yahweh? And there is no other god besides me; a just God and a Savior; there is none beside me."

Nearly fifty years ago, in a study that seems to have been forgotten by scholars of Israelite religion, James Barr noted that in no case did Deuteronomy deny the existence of other deities. Barr suggested that, in view of the use of identical phrasings, the same could be said for (Deutero-) Isaiah. In a monograph entitled, "The Problem of Israelite Monotheism," Barr wrote:

It may also be asked whether the question of mere existence [of other gods] is as important as has been commonly held for those later texts such as Deutero-Isaiah which are supposed to maintain the fullest type of monotheism. When we read in Psalm 14:1 that the fool has said in his heart אֵין אֱלֹהִים, we are commonly agreed that the foolish man is no absolute atheist asserting the non-existence of God; he is denying his significance, refusing to reckon with God. Is it not possible to understand in much the same way those places where Deutero-Isaiah uses the same negative particle?⁴⁷

Taking up Barr's suggestion, and noting the syntactical studies cited above that demonstrated the monolatrous nature of the statements of Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39, I would argue that Isaiah's statements are not denials of the existence of other gods, but express Yahweh's incomparability. The following eleven "denial phrases" can be drawn from the above passages in Isaiah—phrases that are either identical or nearly identical to those found in Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39:

- 1 וְאֵין מִבְּלִעְדֵי מוֹשִׁיעַ
- 2 וּמִבְּלִעְדֵי אֵין אֱלֹהִים
- 3 הִישׁ אֱלֹהֵי מִבְּלִעְדֵי וְאֵין צוֹר בְּלִידְעָתִי:
- 4 וְאֵין עוֹד אֱלֹהִים מִבְּלִעְדֵי
- 5 זוֹלָתִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים
- 6 אֵין זוֹלָתִי:
- 7 וְאֵין עוֹד
- 8 וְאֵין עוֹד אַפְסֵי אֱלֹהִים

⁴⁷ J. Barr, *The Problem of Israelite Monotheism* (TGUOS 17; Glasgow: Glasgow University, 1957-1958), 53-54.

9 כִּי־אֶפֶס בְּלִעָדַי

10 וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר

11 לְפָנַי לֹא־נוֹצֵר אֵל

The first observation is that the three prepositions (זולתי, אפס, [מ] בלעדי) and ואין עוד in the list above are interchangeable. In Isa. 45:6 מבלעדי is juxtaposed with both אפס and אין עוד. In like manner, Isa. 45:21 has מבלעדי in tandem with זולתי and אין עוד. These interchanges allow an important methodological consideration. In some cases the excluding preposition in Deut 4:35,39 and 32:12, 39 found in the syntactical combination of negative particle plus excluding preposition is identical in denial phrases in Isaiah. On occasions where the exact elements in the sequence differ, the preposition is always among those interchanged in the passages above. In order for one to argue that the denial phrases indicate one thing in Deuteronomy (other gods are real but are not Yahweh) and another in Isaiah (other gods do not exist), one would have to produce distinctive prepositional vocabulary in these syntactical structures or different “negative particle plus excluding preposition” constructions. This is not where the data leads. I would suggest that it is prior assumptions brought to these texts about the evolution of monotheism or fears about polytheism or henotheism that lead to a differentiation in meaning for these phrases.

Phrases 1 through 4 in our listing each have the negative particle אין and the preposition מבלעדי in common (save for number 3, where הִישׁ forms a rhetorical question with an expected negative answer instead of אין). Deut 4:35 utilizes this same combination (אין עוד מלבדו; “there is none beside him”). Deut 32:39 echoes the same thought, albeit with a different preposition (אין אלהים עמדי; “there is no God beside me”). In view of the earlier discussion that the wording of Deut 4:35, 39 and Deut. 32:39 does not equate to a denial of the existence of other gods, on what grounds must we conclude that the same language in Isaiah does mean there are no gods?

Phrases 5 and 6 represent Isa. 45:5, 21, and point to the use of the preposition זולתי to describe Yahweh’s relationship to other gods (זולתי אין אלהים; “beside me there is no god” and אין זולתי; “there is none [no god] beside me”). Isa. 45:21 transparently correlates this phrase with the use of מבלעדי in tandem with אין עוד, the same combination as in Deut 4:35. This interchange elicits the conclusion that the negative particle with excluding זולתי does not intend to tell the reader that no other gods exist, only that Yahweh is unique.

Moving on, the phrase אין עוד also occurs in numbers 7 and 8 in our list, thereby aligning those references with the incomparability statements of Deut 4:35, 39. In addition to what has already been said about this correlation, it should also be noted that in Isa. 46:9 אין עוד occurs in parallel with אין followed by the comparative preposition כ, which implicitly allows for the existence of other gods. The terms in the ninth phrase in our list, כִּי־אֶפֶס בְּלִעָדַי, have already been seen to overlaps with terms in Deuteronomy. As a result, phrases 7 through 9 in our list are no evidence that Isaiah denies the existence of other gods.

Phrase number 10 comes from Isa. 43:12, and reads וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר (“and among you there were no strange (gods)”). The distinct feature here is the word זר coupled with the particle of negation, אין. This combination is found in Deut 32:12, which is presupposed in Deut 31:29.⁴⁸ Due to its correlation with

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 394.

Deut 32:39 and Deut 4:35, 39, it cannot be argued that Deut 32:12 conveys the idea of exclusivistic monotheism. The syntactical overlaps again compel us to rule out the tenth phrase.

This leaves only phrase number 11: לְפָנַי לֹא־נוֹצֵר אֱלֹהִים. The phrase is a claim of Yahweh's pre-existence with respect to all other gods; hence Yahweh is incomparable among the gods. Yahweh, the One who created all the members of the heavenly host (cf. Neh 9:6; Isa 40:26; Ps 33:6) is ontologically pre-eminent. The phrase does not deny that Yahweh created other gods. There is no other god who can claim either creative power or chronological priority, and there will never be another like him.

Finally, putting Hebrew syntax aside, if one goes back and reads the denial statements in Isaiah it is quite easy to discern *upon what basis the denial language occurs*. That is, what's the point of the denial? In Isa. 43:10-12 it is Yahweh's claim to be alone in his pre-existence, ability to save, and national deliverance. In Isa. 44:6-8 the focus is on certain attributes of Yahweh. In the texts from Isaiah 45, there are very obvious comparisons between Yahweh's deeds, justice, salvation, and deliverance of his children and the impotence of the other gods. The point is that all these passages are about *comparing* Yahweh to other gods—not comparing Yahweh to beings that do not exist. That would be empty praise indeed.

IV. A Solution for the “Problem” of Israelite Monotheism

So what should we make of the Hebrew Bible's affirmation of the existence of other gods? Does this mean that we have to surrender the view that Israel's religion was monotheistic? The short answer is “No, but we ought to avoid using a 17th century term to describe an ancient Semitic worldview.”

When scholars have addressed this tension, terms like “inclusive monotheism” or “tolerant monolatry” have been coined in an attempt to accurately classify Israelite religion in both pre- and post-exilic stages.⁴⁹ These terms have not found acceptance among many scholars. The frustration over nomenclature is due to the fact that “monotheism” is a modern term, appropriated and popularized by deists during the Enlightenment, applied to the ancient Israelite belief system.⁵⁰ Other scholars have argued for an “incipient monotheism” that could perhaps include the affirmation of other gods who were inferior. There is precedent for this idea in the scholarly exchanges over henotheism, monolatry, and Israelite religion. Historically, henotheism assumes all gods are species equals and the elevation of one god is due to socio-political factors—not theological nuancing. Quoting Max Müller's seminal work on the subject, M. Yusa writes that henotheism was a technical term coined “to designate a peculiar form of polytheism . . . [where] each god is, ‘at the time a real divinity, supreme and absolute’ not limited by the powers of any other gods.”⁵¹ Müller called this idea “belief in single gods . . . a worship of one god after another.”⁵² T. J. Meek referred to pre-exilic Israelite religion as both henotheistic and monolatrous,⁵³ thereby equating the two, based on the prohibition of worshipping other gods. H. H. Rowley, reacting to the work of Meek, moved toward the idea of uniqueness. What distinguished Mosaic religion in his mind

⁴⁹ For these terms and their discussion, see Juha Pakkala, *Intolerant Monotheism in the Deuteronomistic History*, (Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 76; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 1-20, 224-233; MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism’*, 21-71.

⁵⁰ MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism’*, 1-21. As studies of the origin and development of the term show, “monotheism” was initially not meant as an antonym to “polytheism” but to “atheism.”

⁵¹ Yusa, “Henotheism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6:266. Yusa is quoting from F. Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion*, vol. 2 (1881; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1978), 136-137.

⁵² Yusa, “Henotheism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6:266.

⁵³ T. J. Meek, “Monotheism and the Religion of Israel,” *JBL* 61 (1942): 21-43.

from that of other “henotheists” was “not so much the teaching that Yahweh was to be the only God for Israel as the proclamation that Yahweh was unique.”⁵⁴

I would suggest that we frame the issue a bit differently. That is, we should stop trying to define Israel’s religion with inaccurate terms and instead *describe* what Israel believed. Rowley is on the right track, but isn’t specific enough. “Monotheism” as it is currently understood means that no other gods exist. This term is inadequate for describing Israelite religion, but suggesting it be done away with would no doubt make people nervous. “Henotheism” and “monolatry,” while more precise, are inadequate because they just don’t say enough. Israel was certainly “monolatrous,” but that term comments only on what Israel believed about the proper object of worship, not what it believed about Yahweh with respect to the other gods.⁵⁵ Israel did *not* believe the gods were species-equal with Yahweh and essentially interchangeable. Israel did not believe that Yahweh should be viewed as the supreme god *only* because of his deeds on behalf of Israel. Yahweh was the creator of the other gods and in a class by Himself.

My own view is that Israel believed in the existence of other gods, but that Yahweh was “species unique.” That is, Yahweh was an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* was Yahweh—and *never was nor could be*. Yahweh was ontologically superior to and distinct from all the other gods. As Isaiah 43:10 and 44:6-8 affirm, Yahweh alone is pre-existent and uncreated. He in fact created all the divine members of the heavenly host. Their life derives from him, not vice versa. By virtue of His ontological superiority, Yahweh alone is sovereign and thus deserving of worship. Interestingly, species uniqueness is the basis for God’s distinction from the other gods in later Jewish writers.⁵⁶

One could object that the idea of “species uniqueness” is unintelligible with respect to divine beings, perhaps by analogy to the human world. I am human, yet no other human is me, but all humans share the same species status. Hence one can be unique in properties, but *species* uniqueness is a fallacy. The analogy with humankind is flawed, however, since no such claim as pre-existence before all humans is seriously offered. An attribute shared by no other member in the species makes for species uniqueness.

Conclusion

This approach is theologically and philosophically sound, while honoring the data of the Hebrew Bible. And while we have not delved into this application, it also affords us a strong apologetic against the claims of cults like Mormonism, which seeks to base some of its doctrines on divine plurality but assumes incorrectly that all אלהים are the same, and that Yahweh is not species unique. Likewise for those cults like Jehovah’s Witnesses and those researchers whose work was utilized for the *Da Vinci Code*. While they might want to claim Jesus was merely one of the created sons of God in the Hebrew Bible, or that the deity of Jesus was a Nicean invention, such arguments would betray an ignorance of the hypostatic nature of the divine council vice regent in the Israelite divine council.

⁵⁴ H. H. Rowley, “Moses and Monotheism,” in *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 45.

⁵⁵ Please note that in my dissertation I was forced to use “monolatry” to describe Israel’s religion (it was the only acceptable alternative to “monotheism” to my adviser). I was able, however, to include a paragraph or two describing what I really thought without sounding committed!

⁵⁶ For example, 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (J) 2:2 affirms that while other gods are feckless, they exist and are temporary: “And do not turn away from the Lord, and worship vain gods, gods who did not create the heaven and the earth or any created thing; for they will perish, and so will those who worship them.” The same book later has God inform Enoch that, “There is no adviser and no successor to my creation. I am self-eternal and not made by hands” (33:4). *Sibylline Oracles* confess that “God is alone, unique, and supreme” since he is “self-generated [and] unbegotten.” Yet in the same text one reads that, “if gods beget and yet remain immortal, there would have been more gods born than men.” See John J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles, Fragments,” *OTP* 1:470 (the citations are from Fragment 1:16; Fragment 2:1; Fragment 3:4).

My paper yesterday dealt with how the divine council is the backdrop against which first century Jewish binitarian monotheism should be viewed. This in turn roots the New Testament's binitarian high Christology firmly in the Old Testament and Israelite religion. While other nations had a high god with a distinct second god as vice regent in their council structure, Israel's High God was Yahweh, and Yahweh's own essence in the form of a second person was Israel's vice regent. Jesus is consistently identified with Yahweh's hypostases in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁷ New Testament binitarian high Christology can be demonstrably and coherently rooted in Israelite religion. It is indefensible to contend that Jesus is merely one of the created sons of God. He is the *monogenes*, the unique one, and is unique in that he is the essence of Yahweh in human flesh. He is Yahweh's hypostasis, present from eternity, encased in flesh. I know this paper has presented new and perhaps even startling material, but does us no good as evangelicals, whose motives and ethical handling of the data are supposed to match our theology, to deny the plain meaning of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax in passages like Psalm 82. We are not the ones who need fear the text. By contriving explanations that dismiss very real data, we impede our own use of powerful demonstrations of continuity between the testaments for the defense of sound biblical theology.

⁵⁷ To briefly explain, the general structure of the Canaanite (Ugaritic) divine council was a high God (El) at the top, under whom was a second god (Baal) who was called "king of the gods." This second god served as the vice-regent of the sovereign god. It is well known that in the Hebrew Bible epithets of *both* El and Baal were attributed to Yahweh. Israel adopted but adapted the High God / vice regent structure of the council from Ugarit. The effect was that, in Israelite religion, El and Baal were either subsumed into or replaced by Yahweh. All ultimate divine rulership status was thought to reside with Yahweh. But simultaneous to this theological statement, Israel articulated its own High God / vice regent administration of that sovereign rule. In Israel's case, it was unthinkable to have a second God who was distinct from Yahweh running the cosmos. The solution was to have Yahweh as the High God *and* Yahweh as the vice regent. More precisely, the High God of the Israelite council was Yahweh, while the vice regent "slot" was occupied by *Yahweh's own essence in the form of a distinct second person*; that is, Yahweh's hypostasis. Only by this adaptation—Yahweh governing the cosmos with a second being who shared his essence—could Israel retain its belief in Yahweh's "species uniqueness" among the other אלהים of the divine council. The uncreated, "essence-equal" hypostases of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible are identified with Jesus in the New Testament.