

Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible

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INTRODUCTION

Most scholars whose work focuses on Israelite religion recognize that the Hebrew Bible contains a number of references assuming and even affirming the existence of other gods. As a corollary to this observation, scholars also frequently assert that no explicit denial of the existence of other gods occurs until the time of Deutero-Isaiah and thereafter (6th century B.C.E.) in a presumed campaign by zealous scribes to expunge such references from the sacred text. Even the *Shema* and the first commandment do not consign the other gods to fantasy, since the demand is made that no other gods should be worshipped. The data apparently informs us that Israelite religion evolved from polytheism to henotheistic monolatry to monotheism.

While this viewpoint dominates scholarly discussion of Israelite religion, the question ought to be asked whether it is lucid. Does the viewpoint derive from the known data from earliest times into the Common Era, or is the reasoning offered in its support circular? Are terms like “polytheism” and “henotheism” truly adequate to describe what the writers of the biblical canon believed?

Treatments of the issue and the relevant passages by other Jewish and Christian scholars often assume the biblical writers spoke *only* of idols when discussing other gods, or that references to plural אֱלֹהִים in certain passages are best understood as referring to human beings. These options are also flawed in that they bring theology to the text. These alternatives assume that a 17th century word (“monotheism”) has or can rightly be imposed on the theology of Israel, and that without this term, it must be acknowledged that Israelite religion was indeed henotheistic or polytheistic.

This paper argues that the consensus view on divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible is marred because it assumes what it seeks to prove. It thereby fails to handle the evidence of late canonical and non-canonical texts that “retain” a council of gods in Israelite and Jewish theology. A fresh perspective is needed. The article also argues that scholars need not be driven to choose between a presumed evolution toward monotheism for Israel’s religion, a rhetorical use of polytheism to promote monotheism, and arguments that suggest the text cannot mean what it plainly says. In an effort to address these issues and in anticipation of certain questions, it is expedient to detail the weaknesses of what are hereafter referred to as the “consensus view” and the “traditional approach.”

1. THE CONSENSUS VIEW OF MONOTHEISTIC EVOLUTION: OVERVIEW AND EVALUATION

1.1 *Psalm 82*

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 consider divine council texts in the Hebrew Bible as a threat to monotheism.

Concerning the second viewpoint, that polytheism is being used rhetorically in Psalm 82, much is made of the last verse in that psalm, 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 texts such as Psalm 24 and 29, long recognized as some of the most ancient material in the canon.⁶ For example, Psalm 29:1 contains plural imperatives directed at the **בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים**, pointing to a divine council context. Verse 10 declares, “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.” In Israelite cosmology, the flood upon which Yahweh sat was situated over the solid dome that covered the round, flat earth. Since it cannot coherently be asserted that the author would assert that Gentile nations were *not* under the dome and flood, this verse reflects the idea of world kingship. The Song of Moses, also among the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible, echoes the thought. In Exodus 15:18 the text reads, “The LORD will reign forever and ever.” As F. M. Cross noted over thirty years ago, “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.”⁷

Both these perspectives (redactional bungling or rhetorical brilliance) are used to explain the presence of affirmations of other gods in texts where they are “out of place,” texts of late redaction or composition. The primary examples are Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah.

1.2 Deuteronomy

The consensus view argues that Deuteronomy provides evidence of an evolution of Israelite religion toward an exclusivistic monotheism. The argument is offered on the basis of passages that forcefully contend 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 assume and affirm the existence of other gods (Deuteronomy 4 and 32). In answer to the juxtaposition of polytheistic and monotheistic material in these passages, scholars argue that this phenomenon indicates either a rhetorical merging of polytheistic and monotheistic traditions or blunders by the redactors when updating the older traditions to monotheism. Since the evolutionary trajectory is assumed from the outset, an either-or fallacy is set forth for discussion.

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

⁶ Some scholars date the poetry of this psalm between the 12th and 10th centuries B.C.E. See F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 90-93. See also David Noel Freedman, “Who is Like Thee Among the Gods?” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 317.

⁷ F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 45, n. 59.

The first issue before us is to determine whether the relevant phrases in Deuteronomy 4 and 32 actually deny the existence of other gods. The parade examples are Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:39.

Deuteronomy 4:35 – “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the* God (הַאֱלֹהִים); besides him there is no other (אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ).”

Deuteronomy 4:39 – “Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (הַאֱלֹהִים) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (אֵין עוֹד).”

Deuteronomy 32:29 – “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me (אֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי); 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, הַאֱלֹהִים הוּא יְהוָה is a verbless clause with the pronoun emphasizing the subject, but what does it mean that Yahweh is הַאֱלֹהִים? Is this a denial of the existence of other gods? How can that be reconciled with the presumption of other gods in these passages (cp. Deut 4:10-20; 32:8-9)?⁸ It is at least equally probable from a linguistic perspective that the phrase means that Yahweh is superior or incomparable.⁹ That is, Yahweh is *the* God par excellence, as Deut 10:17 states: כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הַאֱלֹהִים (“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, and perhaps even the honesty, in the statement? Other passages in the Torah, such as Exod 15:18, beg the same question. When the author wrote “Lord, who is like you among the אֱלִים?” did he really mean, “Lord who is like you among the imaginary beings that really aren’t there”? When the final redactors, presumably zealous over the new idea of monotheism, allowed Deut 10:17 and Exodus 15:18 to stand, did they simply err, or were they content to put polytheistic language into the mouth of Moses? How does such language accomplish rhetorical persuasion if the audience does not believe that any other deities exist to whom Yahweh may be compared?

But what about the second half of the statements of Deut 4:35, 39 (אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ)? Must the phrasing be construed as a denial of the existence of all other gods except Yahweh? There are several 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

⁸ Reading Deut 32:8-9 with LXX and Qumran material. See footnote 39.

⁹ 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 הַאֱלֹהִים, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.”

Yahweh’s status as הַאֱלֹהִים need not mean that Baal does not exist. It more likely means, “Yahweh is the unrivaled God (of Israel or in general).”

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, מְלַבְדּוֹ 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 set upon a course of action to find grass to save their remaining horses and mules. Verse 6a) then reads: אַחֲזָב הָלֵךְ בְּדַרְךְ אֶחָד לְבַדּוֹ וְעַבְדֵּיהוּ הָלֵךְ בְּדַרְךְ אֶחָד 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 מְלַבְדּוֹ) need not refer to complete isolation or solitary presence. Another example is Psalm 51:4 [Hebrew, v. 6], which reads in part: לִּי לְבַדְּךָ חָטָאתִי (“against you, you alone, I have sinned”). God was not the only person against whom David had sinned. He had sinned against his wife and certainly Uriah. This is obviously heightened rhetoric designed to highlight the One who had been primarily offended. It was God against whom David’s offense was *incomparable*.¹⁰

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 MacDonald noted 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 (מְלַבְדּוֹ, אֶפְסֵי) is that of H. Rechenmacher.¹¹ 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 and (Deutero-) Isaiah under consideration.¹² Rechenmacher argues that the examples in Deuteronomy 4 point to exclusivistic monotheism, but he fails to explain why the construction in

¹⁰ Among several possible examples, two will suffice. 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 (ESV), “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.’” Are we to conclude that Gideon took all 300 men who passed this test and isolated them from each other? It is 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.

¹¹ H. Rechenmacher, “*Außer mir gibt es keinen Gott!*” Eine sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Studie zur Ausschließlichkeitsformel (ATSAT 49; St. Ottilien, 1997).

¹² Ibid., 97-114, cited in Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism* (FAT 2. Reihe 1; Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 82.

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.

MacDonald points out several methodological problems with Rechenmacher's study that are beyond the scope of this article.¹³ For the present purpose, it must be asked whether the negative particle $\text{אֵין} + \text{עוֹד}$ requires non-existence (as opposed to incomparability) and whether similar combinations (אֵפֶס עוֹד) offer the same semantic possibility. The question is relevant to establishing an overlap with the denial phrases in Deuteronomy 32 and Deutero-Isaiah (see below).

Fourth, other verses in Deuteronomy 32 make it clear that the existence of other gods is assumed by the writer.¹⁴ Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and its explicit parallel, Deut 4:19-20, have Yahweh placing the Gentile nations under the authority of lesser divine beings. Some scholars seek to argue that the "sons of God" and "host of heaven" in these passages refer *only* to idols or astronomical bodies.¹⁵ This issue will be discussed in more detail below in another section of this article. At this juncture, attention need only be drawn to Deut. 32:17, a text that, alluding to the failures of Israel in disobeying the warnings of Deut 4:19-20,¹⁶ quite clearly has Moses referring to the other אֱלֹהִים as evil spiritual entities (שָׂדִים): "They [Israel] sacrificed to demons (לְשָׂדִים) who are not God (אֱלֹהִים),¹⁷ to gods (אֱלֹהִים) they did not know; new ones that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not revered." While these lesser אֱלֹהִים are linked to the statues which represented them in the mind of their worshippers (Deut 4:28; 7:25; 28:64), these beings must be considered real spiritual entities. The command in Deut 32:43 (reading with Qumran), "bow down to him, all you gods" assumes this as well. To reject the reality of these entities in the Israelite worldview is to cast the canonical writer as someone who did not believe in the reality of demons, a position out of step with other canonical authors.

¹³ For instance, MacDonald notes that, "Rechenmacher assumes, without argument, that עוֹד is exchangeable for a preposition with excluding function and personal suffix." MacDonald counters by observing that on two occasions (Deut 4:35; Isa 45:21), " אֵין עוֹד " occurs with an excluding prepositional construction . . . and such an exchange would create a tautologous expression." Lastly, as MacDonald and other scholars have noted, neither the usual temporal sense of adverbial עוֹד ("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 עוֹד 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. MacDonald 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" (MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 83-84).

¹⁴ See the ensuing discussion for more on Deuteronomy 32:8-9.

¹⁵ See below for "star language" in Deutero-Isaiah and a refutation of the approach that this language refers only to inanimate astronomical bodies.

¹⁶ For example, Deut 17:3; 29:25-26; 30:17; 31:16; 32:16.

¹⁷ Note that אֱלֹהִים is singular, and so the translation ". . . who are not gods" is inaccurate. Such a translation is also awkward in light of the following plural אֱלֹהִים . Arguing that the אֱלֹהִים were merely idols creates contradictions with other portions of Deuteronomy and the Hebrew Bible. See the ensuing discussion.

The denial phrases in Deuteronomy 4 and 32 must therefore be contextualized in light of the canonical book as a whole. The primary phrases of concern are **וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי** and **אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא**. With respect to the former, in an Ugaritic text with parallel language Baal says: *ʾahdy d ymlk ʿl ʾilm* ("I alone am the one who can be king over the gods").¹⁸ 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 co-regent. More will be said about this phrase in the ensuing discussion of Deutero-Isaiah.

With respect to **אֲנִי הוּא אֲנִי** in Deut 32:39, the most thorough work is that of C. H. Williams.¹⁹ This study concluded that these are not statements of sole self-existence or divine interchangeability ("I am the same"). As such, **אֲנִי הוּא אֲנִי** cannot be construed as an expression that inherently denies the existence of other deities. 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."²⁰ The solution seems to lie in balancing the colon **וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי** ("there is no god besides me") with the phrase **וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מַצִּיל** ("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 says elsewhere:

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^d). 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 כ**. The possibility of translating **עִמָּדִי** 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^ʿalu's succession. Ilu rejects one of them, stating: *dq ʾanm l yrz ʿm b ʿl l y ʿdb mrh ʿm bn dgn ktmsm* ("One of feeble strength cannot run like Ba^ʿalu, one who knuckles down cannot poise the lance like the son of Daganu"; lines 50-52). Since at this moment Ba^ʿalu is not among the living anymore, the translation 'with' is obviously unacceptable here. It has long been perceived that 'like' is the preferable translation.²¹

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

¹⁸ *KTU* 1.4.vii.49-52.

¹⁹ C. H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of ʾAni Huʾ in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (WUNT 113, II; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2000), 39-52.

²⁰ P. Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 226.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 238; cf. note 788 (emphasis mine). On the Ugaritic evidence, see also Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba^ʿalu According to the Version of Ilmilku* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer & Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), 203.

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 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.*²²

If one sees a link between the composition of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, the case for understanding these kinds of phrases in terms of incomparability rather than denial of existence becomes even stronger. The absence of any unmistakable denial of the existence of other gods in Deuteronomy and the Dtr literature is bolstered by a study of the concept of alien deities in that material by Yair Hoffman.²³ Hoffman studied the occurrence and distribution of **אלוהים נכר**, **אל זר**, 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*").²⁴ 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 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

²² 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).

²³ 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.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71. Emphasis is the author's.

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.”²⁵

To summarize, 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 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. The same picture emerges in Deutero-Isaiah.

1.3 Deutero-Isaiah

Nearly fifty years ago, 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:

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 אין 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?²⁶

Deutero-Isaiah is consistent with Deuteronomy since the phrases in his work 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 so, then his alleged denials of the existence of other gods must be contextualized by his broader theology.

²⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

²⁶ James Barr, *The Problem of Israelite Monotheism* (TGUOS 17; Glasgow: Glasgow University, 1957-1958), 53-54.

To begin, scholars of the book of Isaiah have long recognized the presence of the divine council in the book of Isaiah, particularly Isa 40:1-8.²⁷ 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:

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; חוּג 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.²⁸ Likewise the imperative to lift up the

²⁷ 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 . . . פְּנּוּ; “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 עֲמִי 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 בְעֶרְבָה מְסֻלָּה and the ensuing description of this activity in verses 4-5. Second, there is 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, . . . קוֹל אָמַר קְרֵא; “a voice said, ‘call . . .’”). The text-critical issue in Isa 6:8, which involves a difference in grammatical person of the verb, affects only the potential identification of the herald, not the plurality of the audience in the scene (see Seitz, “Divine Council,” 238-246).

²⁸ Habel notes, “The heights of that horizon [*hûg*] are the cosmic North, the traditional mythological abode of the gods” (Norman C. Habel, “He Who Stretches Out the Heavens,” *CBQ* 34:4 [1972]: 417-418). See also, Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (AnBib 39; Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1970), 42-43, 126; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980), 195-198; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 36; Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 376-382.

eyes “to the heights” (מָרוֹם) 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*.²⁹ This becomes noteworthy once it is recalled that in Ugaritic religion *divine* royal sons bore the title *tp̄t*,³⁰ the philological equivalent to שָׂפֵט, 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). It is well known that Ugaritic terminology for the divine council, its members, and its king (El) and co-regent (Baal) are shared by the Hebrew Bible. Benjamin Sommer, in his study of scriptural intertextuality and allusions in Isaiah 40-66, observes that, “A number of themes in the pericope in Isaiah 40 restate those of Psalm 82.”³¹ Note the description of the gods of Psalm 82, the royal sons of the Most High, who judge the earth:

Psalm 82:5-8

“Judge (שָׂפֵטוּ) 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 do not know, they don’t understand (לֹא יֵדְעוּ וְלֹא יִבְיִנוּ). They go round and around in darkness – and all the foundations of the earth totter (יִמוּטוּ כָּל-מוֹסְדֵי אֶרֶץ). 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) for you possess all the nations (שָׂפֵטָה הָאָרֶץ).”

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 הֲתִדְעוּ)? Did you not hear? Was it not told to you from the beginning? Don’t you understand (הֲלוֹא הֲבִינְתֶם) 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 (שָׂפֵטֵי אֶרֶץ) to nothing.”

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Eisenbrauns, 1994), 113; C. Gordon, “*tp̄t*,” *Ugaritic Textbook: Glossary, Indices* (revised reprint; AnOr 38; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblica, 1998), 505-506; Nicholas Wyatt, “Titles of the Ugaritic Storm God,” *UF* 24 (1992): 422. Wyatt in particular notes that *tp̄t* may be taken as referring to “ruling” (*mlk*).

³¹ Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, 124.

The mythologically-charged language³² in Deutero-Isaiah's text ("sits enthroned [הַיִּשֵׁב]³³ above the vault [חֹוֹג]³⁴ 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. Deutero-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 Deutero-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 (שֹׁפְטֵי אָרֶץ). Yahweh then asks, rhetorically, who can compare to himself. Deutero-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 Deutero-Isaiah has the same "starry" sons of God in view here, one has to argue that the prophet is either referring *only* 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, which somehow affect events on earth—specifically the corrupt judgment of Psalm 82. To say the least, this smacks of modern astrology. The former approach requires ignoring the Ugaritic parallel and asserting 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 of that psalm (see below). 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.

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:

Isaiah 43:10-12

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 (אֲנִי

³² The language occurs elsewhere in addition to the texts discussed here. See Isaiah 42:5; 44:24.

³³ 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).

³⁴ Habel notes: "The heights of that horizon [*hûg*] are the cosmic North, the traditional mythological abode of the gods" (Habel, "He Who Stretches Out the Heavens," 421).

(הוּא). Before me no god was formed (לְפָנַי לֹא־נֻצַר), neither shall there be after me. 11 I, I am Yahweh, and besides me there is no savior (וְאֵין מִבְּלַעֲדִי (מוֹשִׁיעַ). 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.”

Isaiah 44:6-8

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 (וּמִבְּלַעֲדִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים). 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 (הֲיֵשׁ אֱלֹהִהּ מִבְּלַעֲדִי)? There is no Rock; I know not any.”

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

5 “I am Yahweh, and there is no other (וְאֵין עוֹד), besides me there is no God (זוּלָּתִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים) 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 (וְאֵין עוֹד). 7 I form the light and create darkness; I make prosperity and create calamity: I Yahweh do all these things.”

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’ (וְאֵין עוֹד אֶפְסֵ אֱלֹהִים).”

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 (וְאֵין עוֹד).”

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 (אֵין זוּלָּתִי).”

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 וְאִין מְבַלְעָדִי מוֹשִׁיעַ
- 2 וּמְבַלְעָדִי אִין אֱלֹהִים
- 3 הֵיִשׁ אֱלֹהִים מְבַלְעָדִי וְאִין צוּר בַּלְיָדָעָתִי:
- 4 וְאִין עוֹד אֱלֹהִים מְבַלְעָדִי
- 5 זוּלָתִי אִין אֱלֹהִים
- 6 אִין זוּלָתִי:
- 7 וְאִין עוֹד
- 8 וְאִין עוֹד אַפְסֵי אֱלֹהִים
- 9 כִּי־אַפְסֵי בַלְעָדִי
- 10 וְאִין בְּכֶם זֶר
- 11 לְפָנַי לֹא־נוֹצֵר אֵל

The first observation is that the three prepositions (אפס, זולתי, [מ]בלעדי) and וְאִין in the list above are interchangeable. In Isa 45:6 מְבַלְעָדִי is juxtaposed with both אפס and אִין עוֹד. In like manner, Isa 45:21 has מְבַלְעָדִי in tandem with זולתי and אִין עוֹד. 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.

Phrases 1 through 4 in our listing each have the negative particle אִין and the preposition מְבַלְעָדִי in common (save for number 3, where הֵיִשׁ forms a rhetorical question with an expected negative answer instead of אִין). Deut 4:35 utilizes this same combination (אִין עוֹד מְבַלְעָדִי; “there is none beside him”). Deut 32:39 echoes the same thought, albeit with a different preposition (אִין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי; “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 means 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 אִין אֱלֹהִים; “beside me there is no god” and אִין זולתי; “there is none [no god] beside me”). Isa 45:21 transparently correlates this phrase with the use of מְבַלְעָדִי in tandem with אִין עוֹד, 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, **בִּי-אֲפֹס בְּלִעָדֵי**, 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 **וְאִין בְּכֶם זָר** (“and among you there were no strange (gods)”). The distinct feature here is the word **זָר** coupled with the particle of negation, **אין**. This combination is found in Deut 32:12, which is presupposed in Deut 31:29.³⁵ Due to its correlation with 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-נֹצֵר אֵל**. 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, Hebrew syntax aside, if one goes back and reads the denial statements in Deutero-Isaiah it is not difficult to discern *upon what basis* the denial language occurs. Is the language concerned with making the point that Yahweh is the only god who exists or something else? 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. All these passages are transparently concerned with *comparing* Yahweh to other gods—not comparing Yahweh to beings that do not exist. That would be empty praise indeed.

2. TRADITIONAL CONCERNS WITH DIVINE PLURALITY IN ISRAELITE RELIGION

Traditional approaches to affirmations of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible are understandably motivated by theological concerns, most notably a perceived compromise of monotheism. The problem is one of language and its assumptions. On one hand, it is assumed that the modern person’s definition of “monotheism” can rightly be imposed on the ancient Israelite mind. On the other hand, it is also assumed that any disconnect between the modern notion of “monotheism” and the theology of the ancient faithful Israelite can accurately be labeled with modern terms like “polytheism” or “henotheism.”

2.1 *Psalm 82: Gods or Men?*

³⁵ Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 394.

With these assumptions firmly in place, traditional objections to divine plurality usually take the form of appeals to the denial statements discussed above, casting the plural אֱלֹהִים of certain passages as human beings, or asserting that the other אֱלֹהִים are only idols. It is convenient to return to several verses in Psalm 82:

מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֶת־אֵל בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט: ¹

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

אֲנִי־אִמַּרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן כְּלֶכֶם: ⁶

אֲכֹן כְּאָדָם תָּמוּתוֹן וּכְאֶחָד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְלוּ: ⁷

⁶ "I said, 'you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you'. ⁷ Therefore you shall die as humans do, and you 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 the God of Israel (the Most High). It is well known that the phrases בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, 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.³⁶ Traditional Christian and Jewish scholars have commonly argued that similar phrases, such as references to Moses as אֱלֹהִים (Exod 4:16; 7:1), Israel as Yahweh's "son" (Exod 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.

³⁶ 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^l* - "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; Mullen, *The Divine Council*; idem, "Assembly, Divine," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:214-217; S. B. Parker, "Sons of (the) God(s)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 204-208 (hereafter, *DDD*); Matitياهو 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.

As a number of other scholars have pointed out, this position is incoherent for several reasons. First, if the אֱלֹהִים in Psalm 82 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 as humans die. A clear contrast is intended by both the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text, saving us from such logic.³⁷ Second, what is the 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 personal 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.³⁸

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 Yahweh’s council are *in heaven in the throne room of God*, not on earth.

2.2 Deuteronomy 32 and the Canonical Israelite Worldview

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 created by Yahweh and ordained to rule the nations comes from somewhere in the biblical corpus, 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.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ 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, but the foundational reason is that in the Israelite worldview, the earthly family of the Most High was originally intended to dwell where the Most High and the heavenly council dwelt. Hence the explicit and frequent overlap between Israelite and wider Canaanite material with respect to descriptions of Yahweh’s abode, his council, divine Sonship (in heaven and on earth), and council activity. The bibliography related to these themes is copious, though not synthesized. See for example, Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (HSM 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* (AnBib 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.

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 [בני האלהים].³⁹ 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. 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.

While Deut. 32:8-9 described the nations being *given over* to gods⁴⁰ who were not Yahweh, Deut. 4:19-20 gives us the opposite side of the punitive coin:

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 (צבא השמים), and be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, which the LORD your God has allotted (חלק) to them, to all the peoples under the whole heaven. 20 But the LORD took (לקח) you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance (להיות לו לעם נחלה), as you are this day.

³⁹ Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut 32:8 (which reads בני ישראל). See for example, P. W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut 32) from Qumran,” *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; idem, “Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text,” *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^h, 4QDt^j, 4QDt^b, 4QDt^k, 4QDt^l,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-79; Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518.

⁴⁰ Deut 32:8a reads בְּהִנָּחֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם. בְּהִנָּחֵל is pointed as a Hiphil infinitive absolute, but should probably be understood as a defective spelling of the infinitive construct: בְּהִנָּחֵל (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”). Instructive parallels include Deut 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Josh 1:6; 1 Sam 2:8; Zech 8:12; and Prov 8:21 (Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 154). Both options are syntactically possible, but which should be preferred? The answer is to be found in Deut 32:9: “But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob is his allotted inheritance.” Verse nine clearly presents the nation Jacob/Israel as *being taken* (cp. Deut 4:19-20) as an allotted (חלק) inheritance. Deuteronomy 4:19-20 makes the active “taking” clear. Note also the wordplay with the Hiphil verb in verse 8. The parallelism of MT’s verse nine would require “nations” be given as an inheritance to the sons of God by the Most High.

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.”⁴¹ In a punitive decision reminiscent of Romans 1, then, 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).⁴² This backdrop to Psalm 82 renders untenable the view that the אֱלֹהִים of that psalm are humans.

2.3 *The Host of Heaven: Idols Only?*

The last objection offered by scholars concerned with perceived implications of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible are that the host of heaven referenced by Deut 4:19-20 (and so, Deut 32:8-9), are merely idols. While the Old Testament at times refers to idols as אֱלֹהִים—something inevitable for the biblical writer given the behavior of the Gentile nations—it is not coherent to argue that the Old Testament writer *always* intends to convey to readers that the gods of the nations are idols.

When this argument is put forth, it is frequently 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. However, as noted briefly above, Deut 32:17 quite clearly has Moses referring to the other אֱלֹהִים as evil spiritual entities (שָׂדִים): “They [Israel] sacrificed to demons (לְשָׂדִים) who are not God (אֱלֹהִים),⁴³ to gods (אֱלֹהִים) they did not know; new ones that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not revered.”

Other passages from Deuteronomy make it clear that idols are not in view when it comes to host of heaven language, in that the gods referred to are those entities whom Yahweh allotted to the other nations.⁴⁴ Triangulating Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9 with other references to the foreign gods in Deuteronomy—the gods / host of heaven allotted to other nations, gods whom Israel “had not known”—compels the conclusion that the biblical writer considered them real entities. These gods, whom Israel later worshipped in apostasy, are called demons. To have these other gods as only idols would then mean that Yahweh instituted idolatry among the nations. The following verses are relevant:

⁴¹Tigay, *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).

⁴² See footnote 15 on the singular form.

⁴³ Note that אֱלֹהִים is singular, and so the translation “. . . who are not gods” is not accurate.

⁴⁴ Passages outside Deuteronomy need to be similarly contextualized. For example, I Kings 14:9 should be balanced with texts such as II Kings 19:18.

Deuteronomy 17:2-3

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 (אֱלֹהִים) and bowed down before them, the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven (לְכָל-צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם), which I have forbidden⁴⁵

Deuteronomy 29:25

25 They turned to the service of other gods (אֱלֹהִים) and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom He [God] had not allotted (חֶלֶק) to them.

The retrospect to the warnings and worldview of Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9 is unmistakable. It is hardly persuasive to assume the writer would have Yahweh setting statues of wood and stone over the nations. Moreover, to be consistent, any interpretation of Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 must be coherent in Psalm 82. It is equally incoherent that Yahweh would sentence the other אֱלֹהִים to die like mortals if they were only wood and stone, or that Yahweh would be presiding over wood and stone statues in heaven (cp. Psalm 89:5-7 [Hebrew, vv. 6-8]). The writer of Deuteronomy did not consider the host of heaven (sun, moon, starry host) whom Yahweh allotted to the Gentile nations only as humanly-fabricated idols.

It is also unsustainable to suppose that the biblical writer merely sought to prohibit the worship of idols associated with astronomical phenomena. It was commonly believed in the ancient world, including Israel, that the heavenly bodies were either animate beings or were inhabited or controlled by animate beings.⁴⁶ The classic divine council passage, I Kings 22, utilizes the heavenly host terminology for what are clearly divine beings:

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 (צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם) standing (עֹמְדִים) 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 (הַרוּחַ) came forward (וַיֵּצֵא) 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 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)

⁴⁵ The prohibition was given in Deut 4:19-20.

⁴⁶ F. Lelli, “Stars,” *DDD*, 809-815; I. Zatelli, “Astrology and the Worship of the Stars in the Bible.” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 86-99.

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 (a member of the host “comes forth,” “stands” before Yahweh, and speaks; v. 21). This issue brings to light another significant problem for those who seek to deny that such language refers to real divine entities in the canonical worldview of Israel. Consider the following texts:

Nehemiah 9:6

6 You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, and all their host (וְכָל־צְבָאִים), 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 (צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם) worships you.

Psalm 148:1-5

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
 2 Praise him, all his angels (מַלְאָכָיו); praise him, all his hosts (צְבָאָיו)! 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 in these passages makes clear the conceptual overlap, in that it has the heavenly host worshipping and praising Yahweh, their creator. The description is also point-for-point consistent with the broader ancient Near Eastern worldview that assumed the stars were animate beings.⁴⁷ Readers familiar with conceptual metaphor know that one cannot argue that the language in these texts is *merely* poetic, as though poetic expressions do not convey the actual belief system of the ancient writer. Conceptual metaphors or poetic expressions are 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. Further, there is little coherence in the idea that theological content cannot be drawn from poetic texts. One wonders what moderns 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 would very little about the religious belief of the people of Ugarit if we took such an approach.

3. MONOTHEISM, HENOTHEISM, MONOLATRY, OR POLYTHEISM? THE INADEQUACY OF MODERN TERMINOLOGY FOR ORTHODOX YAHWISM

Does the affirmation of the reality of other אֱלֹהִים by the canonical authors disqualify Israelite religion as monotheistic? Are other terms used in academic discourse for ancient religious

⁴⁷ See Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*.

pantheons more appropriate? The short answer to both questions, in the view of this writer, is a qualified *no*. The answer is qualified with respect to the realization that little is solved by applying or refusing to apply a single modern term to Israel's ancient view of God.

“Monotheism” as a term was coined in the 17th century *not* as an antonym to “polytheism,” but to “atheism.”⁴⁸ A monotheist, then, was a person who believed there was a God, not someone who believed there was only one spiritual entity that could or should be named by the letters G-O-D. This understanding of the term has been lost in contemporary discourse, and so it would be pointless to call for its re-introduction.

A more coherent approach is to describe what Israelites believed about their God rather than trying to encapsulate that belief in a single word. When scholars have addressed this tension, however, a shift to description over terminology has not been the strategy. Rather, scholars have tried to qualify the modern vocabulary. 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 broad acceptance because they are oxymoronic to the modern ear.

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.”⁵⁰ Müller called this idea “belief in single gods . . . a worship of one god after another.”⁵¹ T. J. Meek referred to pre-exilic Israelite religion as both henotheistic and monolatrous,⁵² thereby equating the two, based on the prohibition of worshipping other gods. But did the canonical Israelite writer believe that Yahweh was superior on the basis of socio-political factors, or was Yahweh intrinsically “other” with respect to his nature and certain attributes? Did the writer view Yahweh as only a being who could not be limited by the powers of other deities, or was there something unique about Yahweh that both transcended and produced this total freedom?

H. H. Rowley, reacting to the work of Meek, moved toward the idea of uniqueness, but did so using the word “henotheism.” What distinguished Mosaic religion in his mind from that of other “henotheists” was “not so much the teaching that Yahweh was to be the only God for Israel as

⁴⁸ 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.”

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 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.

⁵¹ Yusa, “Henotheism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6:266.

⁵² T. J. Meek, “Monotheism and the Religion of Israel,” *JBL* 61 (1942): 21-43.

the proclamation that Yahweh was unique.”⁵³ Rowley’s focus on uniqueness was on the right track, but his approach has the disadvantage of trying to convince the academic community to redefine a term whose meaning by now is entrenched.

The proposal offered here is that scholars should stop trying to define Israel’s religion with singular, imprecise modern terms and instead stick to *describing* what Israel believed. “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 cause considerable consternation among certain parts of the academic community, not to mention the interested laity. “Henotheism” and “monolatry,” while perhaps better, are inadequate because they do not say *enough* about what the canonical writer believed. 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’s nature and attributes with respect to the other gods.

In the judgment of this writer, describing what Israel believed about Yahweh need not involve the kind of high philosophical speculation that most modern scholarship wants to deny the ancient Israelite. Several simple ideas have been communicated to the reader by the canonical authors that allow a description that demonstrates a firm, uncompromising belief in Yahweh’s “species uniqueness” among the other gods assumed to exist. Israel did not believe the other 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. The canonical authors considered Yahweh to be in a class by himself. He was “species-unique.”⁵⁴

In briefest terms, the statements in the canonical text (poetic or otherwise) inform the reader that, for the biblical writer, Yahweh was an אלהים, but no other אלהים was Yahweh—and *never was nor could be*. This notion allows for the existence of other אלהים and is more precise than the terms “polytheism” and “henotheism.” It is also more accurate than “monotheism,” though it preserves the element of that conception that is most important to traditional Judaism and Christianity: Yahweh’s solitary “otherness” with respect to all that is, in heaven and in earth.

But on what grounds can this description be derived? The elements of the text that allow this approach have been copiously documented in the scholarly literature. As Isaiah 43:10 and 44:6-8 affirm, the canonical writers assume that their God was uncreated and always existed, and that the other gods were subsequent. This alone points to intrinsic superiority to and distinction from all the other gods. The other gods were not, chronologically speaking, co-existent. Moreover,

⁵³ H. H. Rowley, “Moses and Monotheism,” in *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament* (New York: Association Press, 1963), 45.

⁵⁴ Interestingly, species uniqueness is the basis for God’s distinction from the other gods in later Jewish writers. 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).

the pre-existent and uncreated Yahweh created all the other members of the host of heaven (Neh. 9:6; Psa 148:1-5). Their life derives from him, not vice versa. Rather than socio-political factors, the canonical writer believed the God of Israel alone was sovereign and deserving of worship because his nature was unique (pre-existence) and his power was unquestionably superior (creator of all that is).

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 *by definition* makes that entity species unique despite any other shared qualities.⁵⁵ In other words, a species unique being need not be unique in every attribute. The entity must only be considered to be set apart in a way or ways that are completely exclusive.

Conclusion

The approach to divine plurality and the matter of monotheism offered here is theologically and philosophically sound, while giving primacy of place to the data of the Hebrew Bible. Scholarship is not advanced by elevating presuppositions to the level of hermeneutical filters or by forcing vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and comparative data in a comfortable theological box. It is the hope of this writer that scholars will be encouraged to re-evaluate their assumptions about the reality of divine plurality in Israel’s worldview and how to parse that reality in understanding Israelite religion.

⁵⁵ This issue would take us into the matter of just what is an אלהים is. Traditional theologians have operated on the assumption that the word אלהים denotes an ontologically unique thing or person. Those who work in the Hebrew text, however, know that there are variety of beings referred to as אלהים. In addition to the many references in this article to the אלהים of the Gentile nations, the Hebrew Bible describes several other beings or groups of beings as אלהים: (1) demons (Deut. 32:17); (2) spirits from Sheol (including the human dead; 1 Sam 28:13); (3) the Angel of Yahweh (Hosea 12:4-5 [Hebrew text] and Gen 48:15-16, noting the compounded subjects with the singular verb יִבְרָךְ); and (4) perhaps even angels (cp. Gen 28:12 and 32:1-2; with 35:1-7 [noting the alternation between singular and plural predication]). The data demonstrates that אלהים is not restricted to Yahweh, and so the term itself cannot denote an ontologically unique being. That assumption is, at least in part, drawn from the use of אלהים as a proper noun for the God of Israel. But that usage is in no way exclusive. In briefest terms, an אלהים is a being whose proper “habitation” was considered the “spirit world,” and whose primary existence was a disembodied one. Hence Yahweh is an אלהים, but he has attributes that nonetheless make him species unique with respect to all אלהים.