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## THE DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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*“I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him” (1 Kgs 22:19 NRSV).*

*“He saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8).*

The Book of Mormon is in many ways a book of the ancient Near East. The book's narrative begins in “the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4), shortly before the Babylonian decimation of Judah. Its primary authors were Israelites, and its later authors, and ultimate eponymous editor, were evidently familiar with Israelite religious, cultural, and literary conventions.<sup>1</sup> Even after centuries of likely integration and convergence with the cultures of ancient America,<sup>2</sup> the peoples

1. All citations from the Book of Mormon come from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009). See John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 77–91; David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, Utah: Heritage Press, 2003); Mevlin Deloy Pack, “Hebraisms,” in *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (ed. Dennis L. Largey; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2003), 321–25; Donald W. Parry, “Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 155–89.

2. On such, see generally John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985); “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–34; *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998); *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013); Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, six volumes (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007). See also Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding’:

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of the Book of Mormon retained certain religious and cultural aspects of the ancient Near East.

The Book of Mormon exhibits, in many respects, an intimate familiarity with ancient Israelite religious concepts. One such example is the Book of Mormon's portrayal of the divine council. Following a lucid biblical pattern, the Book of Mormon provides a depiction of the divine council and several examples of those who were introduced into the heavenly assembly and made partakers in divine secrets. This paper will demonstrate how the Book of Mormon captures and integrates this important aspect of ancient Israelite religion and creates a depiction of the heavenly council of God that fits well with the depiction of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

### Israelite Monotheism, Polytheism, and Monolatry

Before looking at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, we must look briefly at one aspect of Israelite religion. Texts such as the first commandment of the Decalogue, "you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:1),<sup>3</sup> the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut 6:4), and the anti-idolatry polemics of Isaiah (Isa 43:10–12; 44:6–8; 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–22) are typically marshaled to buttress the claim that the Hebrew Bible is strictly monotheistic, which is typically meant that the Hebrew Bible acknowledges the existence of only one deity. While it is commonplace to speak of the biblical depiction of God as monotheistic, there is, in fact, a more complex depiction of deity in the Hebrew Bible, including a depiction of a plurality of divine beings. To illustrate, Gerald Cooke begins his foundational 1964 study with the following admonition, "Any serious investigation of the conceptions of God in the Old Testament must deal with the recurrent references which suggest a pluralistic conception of deity."<sup>4</sup>

Nearly three decades after Cooke's article, Peter Hayman insisted that "monotheism," as understood and used today, is a misused term by modern readers to describe Israelite religion. "The pattern of Jewish beliefs about God remains monarchistic throughout," writes Hayman. By this he means that the Hebrew Bible depicts God as "king of a heavenly court consisting of many other powerful beings, not always under his control" and as "not the

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The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65; Mark Alan Wright and Brant Gardner, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 25–55.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. All Hebrew citations are from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

4. Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *ZAW* 35/1 (1964): 22.

only divine being.”<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Heiser has recently agreed that the question of Israelite “monotheism” is complex, and must be qualified. “‘Monotheism’ as it is currently understood means that no other gods exist. This term is inadequate for describing Israelite religion,” notes Heiser. He adds:

“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.<sup>6</sup>

Mark S. Smith further warns against cavalierly tossing out terms such as “monotheism” and “polytheism” to describe the theology of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup> These terms, Smith reminds us, have nuanced meanings, and have been understood differently by various religious groups. The problem, according to Smith, lies in the fact that our modern terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” are just that—modern. The underlying concepts assumed in these theological terms would probably have been incoherent to ancient Israelites.<sup>8</sup>

Matters are further complicated by the fact that, according to Jan Assmann, ancient Israelite “monotheism” actually assumed a “polytheistic” notion of multiple deities. As Assmann explains,

This idea [monotheism] presupposes the existence of other gods. Paradoxically, the implied existence of other gods is of fundamental importance to the basic idea of biblical monotheism. The opposition of “God” and “gods” reflects the opposition of Israel and the nations (goyim, or gentiles), and the difference of uniqueness that sets “God” apart from the “gods” reflects the difference of being among the chosen or chosenness and of belonging within the b’rit (“covenant”) that sets Israel apart from the nations. In the same sense that the idea of the chosen people presupposes the existence of other peoples, the idea of the “one God” (YHWH echad) presupposes the existence of other gods. Decisive is not the oneness of God,

5. Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *JJS* 42/1 (Spring 1991): 15.

6. Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” *BBR* 18/1 (2008): 28–29, emphasis in original.

7. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10–14.

8. “Monotheism and polytheism in themselves hold little meaning for the ancients apart from the identity of the deities whom they revered and served. No polytheist thought of his belief-system as polytheist per se. If you asked ancient Mesopotamians if they were polytheists, the question would make no sense. If you asked them if they or the other people they knew acknowledge a variety of deities, that’s a different question, because for them the deities in question mattered, not the theoretical position of polytheism. The point applies to monotheism as well. If you asked ancient Israelites . . . if they were monotheists, they would not have understood the question. If you asked them if there is any deity apart from Yahweh, then that’s also another question, because for them what mattered was the exclusive claim and relationship of the Israelite people and their deity.” *Ibid.*, 11.

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which is a philosophical idea, but the difference of God . . . The biblical concept of God is not about absolute but about relational oneness.<sup>9</sup>

And so we are left wondering how to precisely describe the religious system of biblical Israel. Since our modern terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” may not do justice in describing the Israelite conception of God, we are put in an awkward position: how to translate biblical concepts into a modern vocabulary. Perhaps the closest modern word to describe Israelite religion is “monolatry”: “The worship of one god, esp. where other gods may be supposed to exist.”<sup>10</sup> In a monolatrous religious system, one deity is reserved for worship without explicitly denying the existence of other gods. This may be the most appropriate modern term to describe early Israelite religion, inasmuch as “monotheism” may be inadequate, “polytheism” too far-reaching, and “henotheism,” which posits that other familial, tribal or national gods may not only exist, but may also be the object of syncretic worship, does violence to the biblical injunction for Israel to reserve worship for Yahweh alone.

Keeping in mind that we cannot easily sum-up the religion of ancient Israel with only one word, but cautiously using “monolatry” as that one term for our present purposes, we can proceed to look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

#### The Council (and Counsel) of (the) God(s)

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of the divine council it frequently employs the noun  $\text{רַב}$ , which carries both the sense of “council” as well as “counsel.” One standard Hebrew lexicon informs us that  $\text{רַב}$  can mean either a “council, in familiar conversation . . . divan or circle of familiar friends . . . assembly, company” or a “counsel, taken by those in familiar conversation . . . secret counsel, which may be revealed.”<sup>11</sup> The latter sense of  $\text{רַב}$  is comparable to the Greek noun  $\mu\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\sigma\iota\omicron\nu$ ,<sup>12</sup> although this only goes so far in adequately conveying the sense of the Hebrew, which is much more complex than simply “mystery.”<sup>13</sup> In his discussion of  $\text{רַב}$  in the Hebrew Bible, S. B. Parker informs

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9. Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 3–4.

10. Oxford English Dictionary, online edition, s.v. “monolatry.”

11. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, reprint ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2011), s.v.  $\text{רַב}$ , emphasis in original. See also Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), s.v.  $\text{רַב}$ .

12. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v.  $\mu\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\sigma\iota\omicron\nu$ .

13. For a discussion, see Heinz-Josef Fabry, “ $\text{רַב}$ ,” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Riiinggren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry;

us that the word “may be applied to both the human and divine spheres.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as Taylor Halverson explains, “Just as a royal court consists of different members with different roles and purposes (e.g., counselor, messenger, jester, warrior, or bodyguard), so too God’s heavenly court was composed of a variety of heavenly beings.”<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew Bible itself offers varied terminology for God’s council, including:

1. The Assembly of God (עדת-אל).<sup>16</sup>
2. The Congregation of the Holy Ones (קהל קדשים).<sup>17</sup>
3. The Council of the Holy Ones (סוד-קדשים).<sup>18</sup>
4. The Council of Yahweh (סוד יהוה).<sup>19</sup>
5. The Council of God (סוד אלוה).<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, just as the biblical authors use a number of different names to refer to the divine council itself, they also used a litany of names and titles for its members. Stephen A. Geller writes, “Older, especially poetic, texts portray the deity as seated among the assembly of divine beings, who are sometimes . . . called bene ‘el(im) (‘the sons of gods’), kedoshim (‘holy ones’), among other terms.”<sup>21</sup> Ronald Hendel, in his introductory remarks on Israelite religion, straightforwardly informs us that “[Yahweh] . . . was not . . . the only god in Israelite religion. Like a king in his court, Yahweh was served by lesser deities, variously called “the sons of God,” “the host of heaven,” and similar titles.”<sup>22</sup> Turning to the Hebrew Bible, we see ample justification for these claims. Throughout the biblical texts the names for the members of Yahweh’s court include:

1. The Host(s) of (the) Heaven(s) (צבא השמים and צבאות).<sup>23</sup>

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Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986), 5:775–782.

14. S. B. Parker, “Council,” in *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 391.

15. Taylor Halverson, “The Path of Angels: A Biblical Pattern for the Role of Angels in Physical Salvation,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 154.

16. Ps 82:1.

17. Ps 89:5.

18. Ps 89:7.

19. Jer 23:18.

20. Job 15:8.

21. Stephen A. Geller, “The Religion of the Bible,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2027–28.

22. Ronald Hendel, “Israelite Religion,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), xlv.

23. 1 Kgs 22:19; Neh 9:6; Isa 37:16; Ps 89:8; 148:2; Jer 33:22; 44:25; Dan 8:10; Hag 2:6; Mal 3:10.

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2. Gods (אלהים and אלים).<sup>24</sup>
3. Sons of the Most High (בני עליון).<sup>25</sup>
4. Sons of God(s) (בני אלהים).<sup>26</sup>
5. (The) Heavens (שמים).<sup>27</sup>
6. Morning Stars (כוכבי בקר).<sup>28</sup>
7. Angels (מלאכים).<sup>29</sup>

As we see, the ancient Israelites were not reticent to describe the סוד.

### The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible

According to the priestly account of the creation (Gen 1:1–2:4a), the last creative command of God (אלהים) was, “Let us [נעשה] make humankind [אדם] in our image [בצלמנו], according to our likeness [כדמותנו]” (Gen 1:26). The presence of the first person plural prefix on עשה and the first person common plural suffix on both צלם and דמות has long perplexed Christian and Jewish exegetes, whose strict monotheism did not allow them to even entertain the idea of a plurality of gods.<sup>30</sup> However, when the plurals here and elsewhere (e.g. Gen 11:5–7) are read in light of the divine council, a plausible exegesis immediately arises. “The plural us, our . . . probably refers to the divine beings who compose God’s heavenly court,” writes David M. Carr in a succinct

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24. Ex 15:11; Deut 10:17; 32:8, 43; Josh 22:22; Ps 8:5; 82:1, 6; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:9; 135:5; 138:1.

25. Ps 82:6–7.

26. Gen 6:2, 4; Job 2:1; 38:7; Ps 29:1; 89:6. For an excellent discussion, see S. B. Parker, “Sons of (The) God(s),” in *DDD*, 1499–1510.

27. Ps 89:6.

28. Job 38:7.

29. Gen 28:12; Ps 78:49; 91:11; 103:20; 148:2.

30. More traditional exegetes have offered the argument that this is an example of the phenomenon termed *pluralis majestatis*. Briefly stated, the idea is that monarchs, when acting in an official or courtly capacity, are known to address themselves in the plural (“we,” “us,” etc.) and so God, who is the ultimate monarch, can rightly address himself in the plural. (This is, incidentally, how God addresses himself in many of the Surahs of the Qu’ran.) J. R. Dummelow offers the *pluralis majestatis* explanation as one possibility for explaining the plurals of Gen 1:26–27 in his popular, though now outdated, commentary. See *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, ed. J. R. Dummelow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1920), 5. Some Latter-day Saint writers have also used this explanation. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1915), 38.

representation of the view of many modern biblical scholars,<sup>31</sup> which includes Hendel,<sup>32</sup> Levenson,<sup>33</sup> Cooke,<sup>34</sup> Brettler<sup>35</sup> and others.

Another instance in the Hebrew Bible where a plurality in the text is depicted is the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: “Comfort [נחמו], O comfort [נחמו] my people, says your God [אלהיכם]. Speak [דברו] tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry [קראו] to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1–2). This passage employs the plural imperative suffix on the verbs throughout. Likewise, the subject אלהים features the masculine plural possessive suffix. This, in conjunction with other contextual and linguistic evidence, led Frank M. Cross, Jr. in 1953 and Christopher R. Seitz in 1990 to both conclude that the divine council is being addressed in this text.<sup>36</sup> As summarized by J. J. M. Roberts, “God commissions the divine council to issue a message of consolation to the people of Israel, and the prophet, who overhears the voices of the council, clarifies the message. . . . [The] imperatives are all plural, addressed to the angelic members of God’s royal council.”<sup>37</sup>

Besides hinting at the divine council in technical grammatical constructions, there are also fairly explicit narrative depictions of prophets being enraptured in heavenly visions and receiving the סוד. The biblical precedence for this phenomenon is readily discernable in a passage beloved by Latter-day Saints: “Surely the Lord God [אדני יהוה] will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [סודו] unto his servants the prophets [הנביאים]” (Amos 3:7 KJV). More than merely a “secret,” the סוד in this passage is arguably not just confidential

31. David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed.; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

32. Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 6. “The plural seems to refer to the lesser deities of the divine assembly described in other biblical texts.”

33. Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14. “The plural construction (Let us . . .) most likely reflects a setting in the divine council . . . God the King announces the proposed course of action to His cabinet of subordinate deities, though he alone retains the power of decision.

34. Cooke, “The Sons of (The) God(s),” 22–23. “[I]t must be acknowledged as at least a strong possibility that [Gen 1:26–27] represent[s] a conception of a plurality of divine beings.”

35. Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42–43. “[T]he text is implicitly portraying God in terms of a human king: God is talking to his royal counselors or cabinet . . . The creation of people is so significant that this creative act alone demands God consult his cabinet, comprised of angels or other divine figures.”

36. Frank M. Cross, Jr., “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah,” *JNES* 12/4 (Oct. 1953): 274–77; Christopher R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 109/2 (1990): 229–47.

37. J. J. M. Roberts, “Isaiah,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 961.



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instruction delivered by God, but also the manifestation of God's heavenly court.

That the  $\text{סד}$  functions as both divine instruction as well as God's council is seen clearly in 1 Kgs 22. In this pericope, controversy arises over whether Judah and Israel are to recommence their warfare with Aram. While king Ahab of Israel declares his earnest desire to go to war, king Jehoshaphat of Judah remains reluctant, until he can be assured victory by "the word of the Lord" (1 Kgs 22:1–12). The prophet Micaiah is consulted, who prophesies defeat for Ahab and Jehoshaphat if they go to war (1 Kgs 22:13–18). Skeptical of the veracity of this oracle, Ahab presses Micaiah to furnish his prophetic credentials, whereupon Micaiah proclaims:

I saw the Lord [יהוה] sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven [צבא השמים] standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit [רוח] came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, "I will entice him." "How?" the Lord asked him. He replied, "I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." Then the Lord said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it." So you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you. (1 Kgs 22:19–23)

This text provides an excellent example of how a prophet received the  $\text{סד}$ . It included both a theophany of Yahweh on his throne surrounded by his heavenly retinue and subsequently being made privy to confidential heavenly secrets. The prophet Zechariah experienced a similar theophany of Yahweh and his heavenly court, and the pattern is repeated: a theophany of God and his attending host and the disclosure of divine secrets (Zech 1:7–17).

The book of Job further furnishes a description of the function of the divine council, albeit without any explicit prophetic commission. Beginning in Job 1 and continuing into Job 2, a company of the בני האלהים, whom Robert Alter identifies as God's "celestial entourage,"<sup>38</sup> convenes before Yahweh in his court. Included among the בני האלהים is השטן, "the accuser" or "the adversary" (Job 1:6–7; 2:1). The council deliberates over Job's faithfulness, with the accuser insisting that Job only remains faithful because of his abundant blessings (Job 1:7–12; 2:2–8). To prove Job's faithfulness, the accuser is allowed by Yahweh to vex Job.

Finally, we turn to the Psalms for a glimpse at a series of poetic depictions of the divine council. Despite the protestations of some interpreters to

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38. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 12.

the contrary, Psalm 82 is in fact “the textbook passage” to “demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible assumes and affirms the existence of other gods.”<sup>39</sup> This psalm opens with a depiction of God taking “his place in the divine council [בעדה-אל]” and holding judgment “in the midst of the gods [בקרר אלהים]” (Ps 82:1). After reprimanding these gods for failing to uphold their divine mandates (Ps 82:3–4), God then issues a warning: “I say, ‘You are gods [אלהים], children of the Most High [בני עליון], all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals [כאדם], and fall like any prince [השרים]” (Ps 82:6–7).

Some have gone to great lengths to argue that these “gods” in Ps 82 are mortals, perhaps judges or magistrates, but this argument fails for many reasons. Besides the insurmountable linguistic and exegetical absurdities in such a reading, when the imagery of Ps 82 is compared with other Psalms, such as Ps 29:1<sup>40</sup> and Ps 89:5–8 (see below), it becomes clear that these gods cannot be humans, but must be divine beings.<sup>41</sup>

In turning to Ps 89, we see a striking depiction of the divine assembly of Yahweh.

Let the heavens [שמים] praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones [בקהל קדשים]. For who in the skies [בשחק] can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings [בני אלים] is like the Lord, God feared in the council of the holy ones [בסוד-קדשים], great and awesome above all that are around him [על-כל סביביו]? (Ps 89:5–7)

In typical imagery found in other biblical passages describing the divine council (that, as we shall see, is also present in the Book of Mormon), the heavenly assembly of the sons of the gods in this psalm is said to be surrounding [סבב] the incomparably awesome Yahweh. Thus, to insist that Ps 82 is the exception to a fairly explicit and consistent rule in the psalms is nothing more than special pleading.

To summarize, the Hebrew Bible contains rich and dramatic depictions of God’s סוד, which is both the heavenly secrets he reveals to his prophets as well as his intimate cabinet of attending divine beings that he consults from time to

39. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 2. Rebecca Lesses agrees, noting that “the divine council also appears in Ps 82.1, where its members are called ‘gods’ (elohim).” See Rebecca Lesses, “Divine Beings,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 544.

40. “Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings [בני אלים], ascribe to the Lord strength and glory.”

41. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 18–20; Daniel C. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witness to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Daniel C. Peterson; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), esp. 475–84.

time in his dealings. As we've seen, these lesser deities are clearly depicted as existing just as much as Yahweh himself (thus negating the use of "monotheism"). However, these deities are never said to be the objects of proper worship by the prophets who participate in the  $\text{רַב}$  (thus negating the use of "polytheism" or "henotheism").<sup>42</sup>

If space permitted, we would look more closely at additional depictions of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible. Suffice it to say that this brief survey suggests that the Hebrew Bible is saturated with descriptions of the divine council.<sup>43</sup>

### The Divine Council in the Book of Mormon

We now turn our attention to the presence of the divine council in the Book of Mormon. Before we begin our investigation, it must be conceded that the Book of Mormon's depiction of the divine council is neither as frequent nor explicit as the depiction in the Hebrew Bible. The reason(s) for this lack of explicit detail could very well include the fact that, by their own admission, Book of Mormon authors and redactors were obliged to heavily abridge these accounts due to the lack of space on their writing medium, i.e., the plates of Nephi and Mormon (Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Mormon 8:5; 9:33–34; Ether 15:33). Another likely reason, as suggested by Mark Alan Wright, is that as Lehite prophets integrated with the predominant culture around them (Wright argues that culture was ancient Mesoamerica, specifically), they began to more readily couch their experiences in the language and paradigm of ancient Mesoamerica, rather than the ancient Near East. As Wright notes, "Each prophet was a product of his own culture, and the manner in which the divine was manifested to the prophets was largely defined by the semiotics of their culture."<sup>44</sup>

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42. Indeed, *4QDeut<sup>a</sup>* and the LXX goes so far as having Moses imploring these deities themselves to worship Yahweh in Deut 32:43. See Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1999), 193.

43. For a thorough look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible, see Peterson, "Ye Are Gods," 472–594. Many of the subjects discussed in this paper are more fully treated by Peterson. Another look at the divine council from a Latter-day Saint perspective is found in Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints* (ed. C. Wilfred Griggs; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 173–98. Peterson's article approaches the subject with a stronger exegetical reading, while McConkie's article is eisegetical in nature by looking at the subject more through the lenses of modern Latter-day Saint theology. The two should therefore provide a good balance when read alongside each other.

44. Wright, "According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding," 51.

Be that as it may, there are nevertheless narrative details in the Book of Mormon that do indicate a presence of the divine council. In fact, the Book of Mormon wastes no time in introducing the divine council to its readers. After a characteristically Near Eastern colophon,<sup>45</sup> Nephi begins his account by describing the prophetic commission of his father Lehi. Embedded within his account is specific language indicating that Lehi followed the example of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible who also received Yahweh's סוד.

The account in 1 Nephi begins with a report of Lehi's prophetic activity in Jerusalem on the eve of its razing by Nebuchadnezzar II, the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who suppressed an unsuccessful Judahite uprising and sacked Judah's capital in 587 BCE.

Wherefore it came to pass that my father Lehi, as he went forth, prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him, and he saw and heard much. And because of the things which he saw and heard, he did quake and tremble exceedingly. (1 Nephi 1:5-6)

What did Lehi see that was so terrible? Nephi reports that his father "saw the heavens open and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:7-8).<sup>46</sup> From the midst of these heavenly beings,

He saw one descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noonday. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars of the firmament. And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. (1 Nephi 1:9-11)

One of these heavenly beings, Nephi writes, "came and stood before my father and gave unto him a book and bade him that he should read" (1 Nephi 1:11).<sup>47</sup> After reading this text containing heavenly, prophetic knowledge, including knowledge that "manifested plainly the coming of a Messiah" (1 Nephi 1:19), Lehi was prompted to recommence his previously tumultuous prophetic ca-

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45. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 17-18; John A. Tvedtnes, "Colophons in the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (ed. John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 13-17.

46. For the intriguing suggestion that the "numberless concourses of angels" represent a heavenly prayer circle, see Hugh Nibley, "Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past: The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/2 (2010): 70.

47. On the heavenly book motif in the Book of Mormon and the ancient Near East, see Brent E. McNeely, "The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 26-28.

reer by issuing a prophecy against Jerusalem and her inhabitants because of the iniquity of the people. Among other things, Lehi prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed and “many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:12–13, 18–20).

Finally, upon completion of this revelation, Lehi was overcome with ecstasy and joyfully exclaimed: “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish” (1 Nephi 1:14). Nephi concludes the account by noting, “[Lehi’s] soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shewn unto him” (1 Nephi 1:15).

Stephen D. Ricks has called attention to the parallels between the throne-theophany of Lehi and that of Isaiah,<sup>48</sup> and he concludes after a point-by-point analysis that the prophetic calls in both of these texts “establishes in the minds of the people the prophet’s authority and his extraordinary standing with the Lord.”<sup>49</sup> John W. Welch, building on earlier work,<sup>50</sup> has examined Lehi’s throne theophany not just within the confines of Isaiah’s prophetic commission, but also within a broader ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>51</sup> After an illuminating analysis, Welch argues that “Lehi’s prophetic attributes can be understood and confirmed in light of classical Israelite prophecy specific to his own contemporaneous world,” and, furthermore, that “his call as a prophet in 1 Nephi 1 gives a foundation of divine authority, revelation, and guidance for everything that follows father Lehi’s posterity throughout the Book of Mormon.”<sup>52</sup>

We can therefore reasonably infer that Nephi’s quick inclusion of his father’s prophetic call and receipt of the  $\text{רס}$  was to immediately establish the prophetic credibility of Lehi throughout the rest of Nephi’s narrative. It provides legitimacy for Lehi’s prophetic activities, similar to the example we’ve already seen with Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22. What’s more, with the inclusion of Lehi’s vision

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48. Stephen D. Ricks, “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 171–90.

49. *Ibid.*, 187.

50. Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne–Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form–Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 67–96; John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation* (ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 35–54.

51. John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 421–48.

52. *Ibid.*, 437–38.

of the divine council at the beginning of his narrative, it is possible that Nephi also wished to anticipate the opposition of his own brothers to Lehi's prophetic legitimacy (1 Nephi 2:11–13; 3:4–5).

Further insights into the prophetic commissions of Lehi and Isaiah come from David E. Bokovoy, whose work arguing that these are *סוד* narratives not only nicely compliments the earlier work of Ricks and Welch, but is now among the standard treatments on the subject.<sup>53</sup> Bokovoy argues:

Lehi appears, like Isaiah, as a messenger sent to represent the assembly that had convened in order to pass judgment upon Jerusalem for a violation of God's holy covenants. Nephi's account may represent this subtle biblical motif through a reference to Lehi assuming the traditional role of council member, praising the high god of the assembly.<sup>54</sup>

In turning to Isaiah 6 itself, we quickly discern several convergences between the two accounts. Exactly like Lehi, Isaiah is reported to have seen Yahweh "sitting on a throne, high and lofty" (Isa 6:1) and to have been introduced to the divine council ("Seraphs [who] were in attendance above [Yahweh]")<sup>55</sup> who praised Yahweh with acclamations of, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts [יהוה צבאות]; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3).<sup>56</sup> The reactions of Lehi and Isaiah are similar (with both prophets reacting to their respective theophanies with wonder and terror [1 Nephi 1:6; Isa 6:4–5]), as are their respective commissions to pass judgment upon the wicked inhabitants of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:13–15, 18–20; Isa 6:9–13).

A pertinent question is how closely (if at all) Nephi crafted the narrative of his father's *סוד* experience to mirror the prophetic call of Isaiah. Given Nephi's access to Isaiah's writings, which he quotes at length (2 Nephi 16 = Isa 6), and the evidence examined above, perhaps Nephi deliberately crafted, or "likened" (1 Nephi 19:23), the narrative of his father's experience to mirror Isaiah's. This

53. David E. Bokovoy, "On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah's Prophetic Call," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 29–49.

54. *Ibid.*, 37.

55. These seraphs are depicted as fiery attendants of Yahweh who extol Yahweh's holiness and carry out the purification of Isaiah (Isa 6:6–7). For more on the seraphim of Isa 6, see David G. Burke, "Seraph, Seraphim," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 687. That these seraphs constitute Yahweh's divine council seems likely given the very similar language employed in Isa 6 and the indisputable divine council scene in 1 Kgs 22, which we've reviewed above. See the comments by Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene," *JSOT* 31/3 (2007): 263, 269. Kee's entire article gives a very helpful look at the divine council not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in other Canaanite and Mesopotamian religious literature.

56. The angelic song of praise in both Lehi's and Isaiah's experience is a literary device called the Qedussa, which is discussed by Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission," 80–81.

suggests a very cogent and conscious literary development of the narrative of Lehi's  $\pi\sigma$  vision in 1 Nephi 1. Perhaps Nephi paid careful attention to formulate his father's vision to read like the visions of other biblical prophets, particularly Isaiah, and he established a logical beginning point that would establish Lehi as a prophet. This is not to negate the reality of Lehi's vision, or to otherwise suggest it was a merely literary tale, but rather to say that Nephi consciously employed subtle literary techniques in his depiction of Lehi's vision.

Important to note in this regard is Alma's  $\pi\sigma$  experience reported in Alma 36, which directly quotes the text of Lehi's throne theophany. While in his near-death state after being rebuked by an angel, Alma relates the following to his son Helaman: "Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (Alma 36:22). Thereafter Alma reported his reception of heavenly knowledge through this theophany, namely, that "inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God, ye shall prosper in the land" (see Alma 36:1, 5, 26, 30), which is what in turn prompted him to commence his missionary activities in declaring repentance to a wicked Nephite society. As with Isaiah and Lehi, Alma was commissioned to be a prophet in the same pattern: he was called up into God's divine council (note that Alma is said to have both seen God and been instructed by angels), given heavenly knowledge, and commissioned to preach a divine message (Alma 36:24–26; cf. Mosiah 27:32–37). And, like Nephi, it seems that Mormon took extra care to ensure that his readers would catch the connection between Lehi's commission and Alma's. He even goes so far as to directly quote Alma as repeating the words of Lehi found on the small plates.

Continuing further into Nephi's narrative, we turn to the account in 1 Nephi 11. In this text we read of Nephi "pondering in [his] heart" the meaning of another of his father's many visions. Nephi is then suddenly "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1) and engages in a dialogue with "the Spirit," who interrogates Nephi on whether he believes the vision of his father (1 Nephi 11:4). Nephi answers in the affirmative, whereupon the Spirit, like the seraphs of Isa 6 and the angels of 1 Nephi 1, proclaims, "Hosanna to the Lord, the Most High God, for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all" (1 Nephi 11:6). What follows is a revelation wherein Nephi is granted the same (or at least a similar) version of the vision of his father in 1 Nephi 8 and the interpretation of the symbols thereof.

Certainly there is much to be said of this account, including the fact that it captures other authentic aspects of pre-exilic Israelite religion.<sup>57</sup> We turn again to Bokovoy, who offers a reading of this text as Nephi's own  $\pi\sigma$  experience.<sup>58</sup> When read in light of our understanding of the divine council, this text reveals "that Nephi's conversation . . . echoes an ancient temple motif. As part of this paradigm . . . the text depicts the Spirit of the Lord in a role associated with members of the divine council in both biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions."<sup>59</sup> Specifically, Bokovoy argues that the exchange between Nephi and the Spirit mirror other biblical and ancient Near Eastern  $\pi\sigma$  dialogues. What's more, the exchange in 1 Nephi 11, when coupled with the accounts of King Benjamin (Mosiah 5) and the brother of Jared (Ether 2–3) constitute a type scene or "template for depicting an official encounter between witness and worshiper in preparation for the introduction to advanced revelatory truths" that is recurrent throughout the Book of Mormon.<sup>60</sup> In the case of the account in 1 Nephi 11, Bokovoy concludes:

Nephi participated in a celestial ascent to an exceedingly high mountain possessed by the most high God. The description of this experience in 1 Nephi 11 shares much in common with traditional Near Eastern imagery concerning the divine assembly and invocation of heavenly beings as council witnesses. In this context, Nephi's exchange with the Spirit of the Lord provides a dramatic portrayal of the faith necessary to receive introduction to advanced spiritual truth. Through his testimony, as born to the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi proved himself worthy to pass by the heavenly sentinel and enter the realm of greater light and knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

Nephi's inclusion of the account of his own  $\pi\sigma$  experience can further be seen to perpetuate the same goal as the inclusion of his father's. Remember that one aspect of the  $\pi\sigma$  narrative is to establish the legitimacy of a prophet's calling, particularly in a time of controversy, such as in a situation where competing claims to prophetic authority creates strife.<sup>62</sup> This fact, if true, casts Nephi's

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57. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scriptures, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (ed. Davis Bitton; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (ed. John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 69–82.

58. David E. Bokovoy, "'Thou Knowest That I Believe': Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23.

59. *Ibid.*, 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

61. *Ibid.*, 22.

62. This can be seen, for instance, in Jer 23, where Jeremiah's prophetic competitors who have not been introduced to Yahweh's council are dismissed as illegitimate (v. 18, 22). See the commentary by Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*



account of his  $\tau\sigma$  experience in a new light. Recall the tension that rises between Nephi and his elder brothers over matters relating to the interpretation and meaning of their father's vision. Upon returning to his family after his sequestered vision, Nephi is "grieved" (1 Nephi 15:4) to discover that his brothers "were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them." The cause of this contention was due to the esoteric nature of Lehi's vision, "which was hard to be understood save a man should inquire of the Lord" (1 Nephi 15:3). "Behold," the brothers lament in reference to aspects their father's vision, "we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken" (1 Nephi 15:7). Nephi then instructs his brothers that their ignorance stems from the fact that, unlike him, they have not inquired of God, and therefore were not privileged to receive the requisite knowledge needed to understand their father's vision.

Nephi thus establishes his own credibility as his father's prophetic successor. Having participated in the  $\tau\sigma$ , Nephi was granted the heavenly secrets needed to know and understand the apocalyptic visions granted to his father (1 Nephi 15:8–11). These same heavenly secrets were not imparted to Nephi's brothers, who were barred from participating in the  $\tau\sigma$  because of "the hardness of [their] hearts" (1 Nephi 15:10). "Do ye not remember," Nephi urges his brothers, "the thing which the Lord hath said?—if ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you" (1 Nephi 15:11).

Continuing further into the Book of Mormon, we discover an account in Mosiah 22 that serves as a council text on a temporal level. In ancient Near Eastern thought, the earthly court of the king was (at least ideally) the earthly counterpart to God's heavenly council. In this chapter, Ammon and Limhi "consult" (one could say "counsel") with the people as to how they should "deliver themselves out of bondage" (Mosiah 22:1). The people "gather[ed] themselves together" and deliberated for some time, with Gideon eventually presenting himself before the king with a desire to "be [the king's] servant and deliver this people out of bondage" (Mosiah 22:4). Gideon successfully pleads his case (Mosiah 22:5–8), and is commissioned to be an agent of the king's in delivering a perfidious tribute of wine to their Lamanites captors in order to incapacitate them during the people's escape (Mosiah 22:9–16). The format of the proceedings of the council scene in Mosiah 22 follows that of the divine

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(Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–60. "Unlike these [false] prophets, who are so readily dismissed, it is to be inferred that Jeremiah did indeed stand in the divine council, was sent by YHWH, and so speaks a true word (see 23:18)."

council scenes in 1 Kgs 22 and Isa 6 and 40 nicely, albeit on a temporal level. In these accounts, when a problem arises, members of the council deliberate and consult for a solution, and one of the members of the divine council (a heavenly being or a prophet) is eventually sent as an agent of the king (or God) to fulfill the desire of the council.<sup>63</sup>

Another possible divine council narrative can be found in Helaman 10, although with some irregularities. Regardless of these irregularities, this narrative is worth looking at, as it offers some details that seem to indicate a divine council scene. In this account, Nephi, the son of Helaman, returns defeated after being rejected as a prophet by the people of Nephi: “And it came to pass that there arose a division among the people, insomuch that they divided hither and thither and went their ways” (Helaman 10:1). This is a classic set up for a divine council narrative, where controversy arises that will eventually need settling by prophetic intervention. Nephi, in retreat, retires “towards his own house” and begins pondering “upon the things which the Lord had shewn unto him” (Helaman 10:2). As Nephi pondered his situation “a voice came unto him” and delivered divine consolation (Helaman 10:3). What follows is God’s reaffirmation of Nephi’s prophetic call (cf. Helaman 7:1–2). “Behold, thou art Nephi and I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels that ye shall have power over this people” (Helaman 7:6). Note that God is said to declare this in his council of angels, a significant detail.

What makes this possible divine council account irregular is that Nephi is never explicitly said to have seen God and his council, but rather that a voice merely came to him. This silence does not entirely rule out the possibility that Nephi did indeed see the council as he heard the voice, but the lack of an affirmatively explicit narrative detail is such that it cannot be positively said that he did. Another irregularity is that God, and not one of his divine messengers, is said to have given Nephi his call directly. In the examples previously examined, it is one of the messengers of the council that delivers the report or commission. Notwithstanding these irregularities, what follows after the commission is similar to the prophetic call narratives examined in this paper, as Nephi “did return unto the multitudes . . . and began to declare unto them the word of the Lord” straightway after his theophany (Helaman 10:12).

## Conclusion

Much more could be said about the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon than this brief survey will allow. Besides the examples

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63. I am grateful to my friend Neal Rappleye for introducing me to this reading of Mosiah 22.

cited in this paper, there remain other narratives possibly depicting the divine council in the Book of Mormon that deserve our close attention (including 3 Nephi 17:11–25; 28). The examples of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible discussed in this investigation likewise deserve closer scrutiny. In the end, this paper by no means presumes to be the final say on the matter, but is rather an invitation for the reader to look more carefully at the function of the divine council in these two ancient Near Eastern records.