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Title You've Seen One *Elohim*, You've Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism's Use of Psalm 82

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Abstract Heiser discusses Psalm 82 and the interpretations of Elohim that Latter-day Saints and evangelicals derive from that scriptural passage. Heiser then offers alternative interpretations from his own study.

YOU'VE SEEN ONE *ELOHIM*, YOU'VE SEEN THEM ALL? A CRITIQUE OF MORMONISM'S USE OF PSALM 82

Michael S. Heiser

Over the course of the last eight years I have read several papers dealing in one way or another with that feature of Israelite religion known as the divine council. Anyone doing serious research in Israelite religion is soon confronted with the powerful evidence for a pantheon in the Hebrew Bible.¹ It is a dramatic example of the kind of issue with which evangelical scholars who pursue advanced studies in Hebrew and Semitics must deal. It is also a good example of why some evangelical colleagues whose scholarship focuses on areas outside the Hebrew text, such as apologetics or philosophical theology, cannot appreciate why their articulation of an issue related to our area of specialization may lack explanatory power or coherence. I am reminded of Wayne Grudem's sobering analysis of several years ago at the Evangelical Theological Society as to how we textual scholars often fail to make the carefully

1. For an introduction to the divine council and the sons of God, see Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 22–47; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980); Mullen, "Divine Assembly," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:214–17; Simon B. Parker, "Sons of (the) God(s)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd extensively rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 794–800; Parker, "Council (סוּד)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 204–8; Matitiah Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly: An Interpretation of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40–41 (1969–70): 123–37; Julian Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14 (1939): 29–126.

mined data of exegesis accessible to our colleagues to formulate a coherent theology derived from the Hebrew and Greek texts, not the English Bible. We too often work in isolation from one another.

I bring this up for two reasons. First, because after spending nearly a decade absorbed in study of the divine council, I feel more strongly than ever that there is not a single doctrine that is untouched by the subject. The reason is simple: the divine council is all about the nature of God, his creation and rulership of all that is, his heavenly and earthly family, and the destiny of the earth and the larger cosmos. I think the topic at hand will illustrate just how far the reach of this subject extends. Second, I want to prepare you for the fact that I am going to agree and disagree with both the Latter-day Saint and evangelical positions in this paper. Ultimately, my focus is on certain flaws in the LDS understanding and use of Psalm 82, but that should not be taken as affirmation of what I know by now are common evangelical positions on the contents of this psalm.

Since I have already written on many of the topics I will touch on in this paper, I will direct you to the full argumentation for certain points as it appears elsewhere. By way of telegraphing my positions, I offer the following summaries.

A. Position statements on Psalm 82 and the divine council with which many evangelicals would probably disagree and with which many Latter-day Saints would likely agree:

1. The plural *ʾēlohîm* of Psalm 82:1 and 6 are divine beings, not human judges or humans fulfilling any role.

2. The term *monotheism* is inadequate to describe what it is Israel believed about God and the members of his council. As the text explicitly says, there are other *ʾēlohîm*.

3. References to “us” and “our” in passages like Genesis 1:26 do not refer to the Trinity. The plural *ʾēlohîm* of Psalm 82 are also not members of the Trinity.

4. The denial statements of Isaiah and elsewhere (“there is no god beside me”) do not constitute denials of the existence of other *ʾēlohîm*. Rather, they are statements of Yahweh’s incomparability.

5. The God of Israel did at times make himself known to people in the Old Testament in ways detectable to the human sense, including the corporeal.

6. The Mormon understanding of God is not *inherently* polytheistic. It is polytheistic if Latter-day Saints insist that all *ʾēlōhîm* are species-equals, which depends in part on how they parse the divine council.

7. “Spirit beings,” such as the plural *ʾēlōhîm* of Psalm 82, are created and therefore made of *something*. Invisibility does not mean that the invisible thing is immaterial. All things created were made, and are made, of some form of matter, whether we can detect it by our sense or science or not. To deny this would mean that “spirit beings” are not part of the created order.

8. Jesus’s quotation of Psalm 82 in John 10 is no argument for his deity (or rebuttal to the charge of blasphemy) if it is assumed that Jesus thought the *ʾēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 were humans.

B. Position statements on Psalm 82 and the divine council with which many Latter-day Saints would probably disagree and with which many evangelicals would likely agree:

1. The plural *ʾēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 are ontologically inferior to Yahweh. That is, Yahweh, the God of Israel, was considered ontologically unique in Israelite thought. Yahweh is an *ʾēlōhîm*, but no other *ʾēlōhîm* are Yahweh.

2. The terms *henotheism*, *polytheism*, and *monolatry* are inadequate to describe what it is Israel believed about God and the members of his council.

3. Yahweh is neither a son of El (Elyon) nor a god distinct from El (Elyon) in Israelite religion.

4. The notion of a godhead does not derive from Hellenistic philosophy. Its antecedents are Israelite and Jewish.

5. Yahweh was therefore not “birthed” into existence by the “olden gods” described in Ugaritic texts. Yahweh had no parent and no beginning.

6. Corporeal appearances of deity are not evidence that God the Father has a corporeal nature.

7. The concept of the image of God does not advance the idea that there is a genus equation of God and humankind or that God was once a man.

8. Jesus's quotation of Psalm 82 in John 10 is not to be interpreted as though Jesus thought the *ʾēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 were humans, and so it provides no basis for a genus equation of God and humankind.

While it would be true in many respects that the position statements of group A are fundamental to arguing against certain Latter-day Saint ideas addressed in group B, my strategy for most of this paper will be to explain statements from both groups in tandem through a series of four topics.

Topic 1: Psalm 82, Gods or Men? (items A1, A3)

Evangelical objections to divine plurality in Psalms usually take the form of casting the plural *ʾēlōhîm* of certain passages as human beings.² It is convenient at this point to reference several verses in Psalm 82:

1 God (*ʾēlōhîm*) stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*ʾēlōhîm*) he passes judgment. . . .

6 I said, "you are gods (*ʾēlōhîm*), 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.

A few observations will suffice. Notice that in verse one the first *ʾēlōhîm* must point to a singular being, the God of Israel, due to grammatical agreement with singular verb forms in the verse (*niššab* and *yīšpōt*). The second *ʾēlōhîm* must be plural because of the preposition that precedes it. Appeals to the Trinity here are indefensible since the plural *ʾēlōhîm* are being judged for their corruption in the rest of the

2. It is also at times asserted that these *ʾēlōhîm* are only idols. For a refutation of that view, see Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* (forthcoming).

psalm and sentenced to “die like humankind.”³ In verse six, the plural *ʾēlōhîm* of 82:1 are referred to once again as *ʾēlōhîm* but are further identified as sons of the God of Israel (the Most High).

The power of the “divine beings” interpretation of the plural *ʾēlōhîm* in this psalm derives from both internal and external considerations.⁴ With respect to the former, if the *ʾēlōhîm* 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 *ʾēlōhîm* will be stripped of their immortality at God’s discretion and die as humans die. 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 Deuteronomy 32:8–9 have the situation exactly opposite—Israel was *separated* from the nations to be God’s personal possession and the focus of his rule.

Lastly and most tellingly, Psalm 89:5–8 (Hebrew, vv. 6–9) renders a human interpretation for the plural *ʾēlōhîm* nonsensical since this unambiguously parallel text clearly states that the council of the sons of God is in heaven, not on earth:

5 Let the heavens⁵ praise your wonders, O LORD, your
faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! 6 For who in the

3. Plural language like that found in Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7 is most coherently interpreted as exhortations or statements made by the singular God to his council members, an interpretive option that is not novel. If these passages were the only passages that evinced divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible and there were no explicit references to a divine council, one could perhaps infer the Godhead, but this would be reading the New Testament back into the Old.

4. Fuller defenses of this view accompanied by bibliographic sources are found in Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January–March 2001): 52–74; Willem S. Prinsloo, “Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?” *Biblica* 76/2 (1995): 219–28; and Lowell K. Handy, “Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15/47 (1990): 51–66; Cyrus H. Gordon, “אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 139–44.

5. The terms *heavens* and *faithfulness* in these verses may be best understood abstractly as “heavenly ones” and “faithful ones.”

skies (*baššaḥaq*) can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of God (*biḥnē ʿēlīm*) is like the LORD, 7 the fearsome God in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all who are around him? 8 O LORD God of hosts, who is as powerful as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? (Psalm 89:5–8)

Externally, it is well known among Semitists and scholars of the Hebrew Bible that the phrases *bēnē ʿēlīm*, *bēnē ʿēlōhīm*, and *bēnē ḥāʾēlōhīm* have certifiable linguistic counterparts in Ugaritic texts referring to a council of gods under El and that the meaning of these phrases in the Hebrew Bible points to divine beings.⁶ Those who work outside the primary texts are often unaware of these data and thus fail to discern their significance.

Evangelical scholars have commonly appealed to Exodus 21:6 and 22:8–9 as proof that the *ʿēlōhīm* of Psalm 82 are humans.⁷ Neither pas-

6. There are several general phrases for a council of gods that provide a conceptual parallel with the Hebrew Bible: *ḫīr ʿilm*—“the assembly of El/the gods” (Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, “*ḫīr*,” in *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [hereafter, *DULAT*] 2:669; Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit [hereafter, *KTU*], 1.47:29, 1.118:28, 1.148:9; *ḫīr bn ʿilm*—“the assembly of the sons of El/the gods” (*DULAT* 2:669; *KTU* 1.4.III:14); *ḫīr 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); *mḫīrt 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 *ʿdt ʿilm*—“assembly of El/the gods” (*DULAT* 1:152; see *KTU* 1.15.II: 7, 11); *dr ʿil*—“assembly (circle) of El” (*DULAT* 1:279–80. 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* 1:279–80; see *KTU* 1.40:25, 33–34); *dr dt šmm*—“assembly (circle) of those of heaven” (*DULAT* 1:279–80; see *KTU* 1.10.I: 3, 5); *dr ʿil wḫīr bʿl*—“the assembly (circle) of El and the assembly of Baal” (*DULAT* 1:279–80; 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.

7. Another attempt to avoid taking Psalm 82 at face value is to argue that references to Moses as *ʿēlōhīm* (Exodus 4:16; 7:1), Israel as Yahweh’s “son” (Exodus 4:23; Hosea 11:1), and Israelites as “sons of the living God” (Hosea 1:10 [Hebrews 2:1]) mean that the *ʿēlōhīm* of Psalm 82 are human rulers, namely the elders of Israel. None of these references undoes the fact that the council of *ʿēlōhīm* is a heavenly one in Psalms 82 and 89. In fact, I have never actually seen any publication objecting to the *ʿēlōhīm* as divine beings that includes discussion of Psalm 89. A full answer as to the import and meaning of Moses as

sage is any help for that view, actually. Exodus 21:1–6 recounts the procedure undertaken when a slave chooses to stay with his master rather than go free. Part of that procedure reads, “then his master shall bring him to *ʔēlohîm*, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.” The word *ʔēlohîm* here can easily be translated as a singular (“God”) and often is, making an appeal to this text as a plural tenuous. However, it seems quite plausible that the final editor of Deuteronomy thought it might be a plural, or deemed that it could be understood as a plural, because in the parallel passage to Exodus 21:1–6 found in Deuteronomy 15:15–18, the reference to bringing the slave before *ʔēlohîm* has been removed. A removal only makes sense if a later editor, in the wake of Israel’s punishment for following after other gods, thought that *ʔēlohîm* might sound theologically inappropriate. If the word was understood as referring to plural humans, there would be no such need to remove it. Of course an original Mosaic text in Deuteronomy 15 may simply have omitted this detail for some indiscernible reason. That option, of course, would lend no weight to the human *ʔēlohîm* view since *ʔēlohîm* can easily be translated as singular in the passage.

Exodus 22:7–9 (Hebrew, vv. 6–8) is also interesting but lends no credence to the argument that plural *ʔēlohîm* refers to humans.

ʔēlohîm and human beings as God’s children requires a good deal of background discussion related to the divine council. 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* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Brendan 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 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979); Harald Riesenfeld, “Sons of God and Ecclesia: An Intertestamental Analysis,” in *Renewing the Judeo-Christian Wellsprings*, ed. Val A. McInnes (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 89–104; James Tabor, “Firstborn of Many Brothers: A Pauline Notion of Apotheosis,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1984 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: 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*, ed. Adele Berlin (Bethesda, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 93–103.

7 If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man's house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. 8 If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God (*ʔēlōhîm*) to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. 9 For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, "This is it," the case of both parties shall come before God (*ʔēlōhîm*). The one whom God (*ʔēlōhîm*) condemns shall pay double to his neighbor. (English Standard Version, ESV)

The question is whether *ʔēlōhîm* speaks of the lone God of Israel or of plural individuals (Israel's elders). To address this question, we must consider the passage in Exodus 18 where Jethro appeals to Moses to select helpers:

13 The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" 15 And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God (*ʔēlōhîm*); 16 when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." 17 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. 19 Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God (*ʔēlōhîm*) be with you! You shall represent the people before God (*hāʔēlōhîm*) and bring their cases to God (*hāʔēlōhîm*), 20 and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. 21 Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and

place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 22 And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.” 24 So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 25 Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 26 And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. 27 Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country. (Exodus 18:13–27)

The points to be made here are straightforward: (1) the men appointed by Moses are never called *ʔēlohîm* or *hāʔēlohîm* in the text; (2) even after the elders are appointed, the singular God (*hāʔēlohîm*) is still hearing cases, which may suggest the same is happening in Exodus 22:8; and (3) one cannot argue that *hāʔēlohîm* refers to God while *ʔēlohîm* minus the article (the form in Exodus 22:8) refers to the human elders, since *ʔēlohîm* and *hāʔēlohîm* are interchanged in verse 19 with reference to the singular God of Israel. Even the fact that *ʔēlohîm* in Exodus 22:8 agrees with a plural predicator does not force us to interpret *hāʔēlohîm* in that verse as referring to a group. The noun *ʔēlohîm* plus plural predication occurs in one of nine instances of which I am aware in the Hebrew Bible.⁸ For now, it should be noted that only one of them might indicate plural divine beings, but that is shaky at best and would only serve to argue in my favor here.⁹ Other instances, such as 2 Samuel

8. These passages are Genesis 20:13; 35:7; Exodus 22:8; 1 Samuel 28:13; 2 Samuel 7:23; 1 Kings 19:2; 20:10; Psalm 58:12.

9. I speak here of Genesis 35:7. A case for plurality can be coherently argued, but it would require an exceptional instance where *hāʔēlohîm* refers to multiple divine beings for Israel. Elsewhere *hāʔēlohîm* is found in contexts where foreign gods are the referent, but this would be the lone occasion for the council gods of Israel.

7:23, contain grammatical and contextual markers that point to *ʔēlohîm* still being a singular entity, despite this unusual grammatical agreement. In short, there is nothing in the text that compels us to understand *ʔēlohîm* or *hāʔēlohîm* in Exodus 22:8–9 as plural or as humans.

Topic 2: Psalm 82 and the “Problem” of Israelite Monotheism (items A2, A4, A6, A7, B1, B2, B3, B5)

I have placed the word *problem* in quotation marks to highlight my contention that the divine plurality of Israelite monotheism is only problematic when certain presuppositions—some of them longstanding—are foisted on the Hebrew Bible.

- Presupposition 1: Israel’s religion evolved from polytheism to an intolerant monotheism that denied the existence of other *ʔēlohîm* during the time of (Deutero) Isaiah.¹⁰

I have critiqued this first presupposition at length in my dissertation and offer here only a summation of why, despite its mainstream status, I think this view lacks coherence.¹¹

Psalm 82 is considered late in composition on several grounds, most notably because of its placement in Book III of Psalms and its use by Deutero-Isaiah.¹² The clear reference to a pantheon over which Yahweh presides must be explained since by this time Israelite religion is assumed to have evolved to an intolerant monotheism. As a result, many scholars consider Psalm 82 to be either a vestige of polytheism overlooked by monotheistic redactors or perhaps a deliberate rhetorical use of Israel’s polytheistic past to declare the new outlook of monotheism.¹³ After the exile, so it is put forth, the gods of the nations are relegated to the status of angels.

10. I use the term for convenience since I am arguing against the critical mainstream view with this point.

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

12. See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Dallas: Word, 1990), xxv–xxvi; Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 124. Throughout this article I use “Deutero-Isaiah” for convenience.

13. See for example, Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003);

Both proposals fail on a number of levels. With respect to the first option, it is evasive to appeal to inept redactors when one's theory of a campaign to stamp out polytheistic texts encounters a "problem passage," especially when Psalm 82 is by no means the only text evincing divine plurality and a divine council "missed" by redactors. To cite but one example, there are explicit references to gods and a divine council in Second Temple period Jewish literature. In the Qumran sectarian material alone there are approximately 185 occurrences of *ʾēlōhīm*, *hāʾēlōhīm*, *bēnē ʾēlīm*, *bēnē ʾēlōhīm*, and *bēnē hāʾēlōhīm* in contexts where a divine council is mentioned with the same vocabulary (*ʿēdāh*, *sôd*, *qāhāl*) utilized in texts of the Hebrew Bible for a divine assembly.¹⁴ In fact, it is apparent that some of these references allude to or draw on canonical material. If there was a campaign to allegedly correct ancient texts and their polytheistic views, the postexilic Jewish community either did not get the message or ignored it.

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 preexilic texts such as Psalm 24 and 29, long recognized as some of the most ancient material in the canon.¹⁵ For example, Psalm 29:1 contains plural imperatives directed at the *bēnē ʾēlīm*, 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

Simon B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God—Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995): 532–59.

14. Heiser, "The Divine Council," 176–213.

15. Some scholars date the poetry of this psalm to the period between the twelfth and tenth centuries BCE. See Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 91–93. See also David N. Freedman, "Who Is Like Thee among the Gods? The Religion of Early Israel," 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.

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 Frank 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 king is a relatively late development in Israelite thought seems untenable.”¹⁶ I would agree.

The objection that naturally arises in response is that statements from the mouth of Yahweh that “there is none beside me” are denials of the existence of other *ʔēlohîm*. The problem with this argument is threefold.

First, all the denial statements made by Isaiah and other prophets have exact or near exact linguistic equivalents in two passages universally regarded as containing “vestiges” of other gods—Deuteronomy 4:19–20 and 32:8–9.¹⁷ These statements actually speak to Yahweh’s incomparability among all the other *ʔēlohîm*, not to the denial of the existence of other *ʔēlohîm*.

The second problem concerns Deuteronomy 32:17, a text that alludes to the failures of Israel in disobeying the warnings of Deuteronomy 4:19–20.¹⁸ This text quite clearly has Moses referring to the other *ʔēlohîm* as evil spiritual entities (*šēdîm*): “They [Israel] sacrificed to demons (*šēdîm*) who are not God (*ʔēloah*),¹⁹ to gods (*ʔēlohîm*) they did not know; new ones that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not revered.” While these lesser *ʔēlohîm* are linked to the statues that represented them in the mind of their worshippers (Deuteronomy 4:28; 7:25; 28:64), these beings must be considered real spiritual entities.

16. Frank M. Cross and David N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 65 n. 59.

17. See the discussion of the linguistic work published in this area in Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); and Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” (forthcoming).

18. For example, Deuteronomy 17:3; 29:25–26; 30:17; 31:16; 32:16.

19. Note that *ʔēloah* is singular, and so the translation “. . . who are not *gods*” is inaccurate. Such a translation is also awkward in light of the following plural *ʔēlohîm*. Arguing that the *ʔēlohîm* were merely idols creates contradictions with other portions of Deuteronomy and the Hebrew Bible.

The command in Deuteronomy 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.

Lastly, there is a logic problem. 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 Isaiah 43:10–12 Yahweh claims to be unique in his preexistence, in his ability to save, and in his national deliverance. In Isaiah 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.

- Presupposition 2: Yahweh and El were at one time separate deities in the primitive stage of Israel’s religion.

Many scholars who hold to the evolutionary trajectory of Israelite religion described above hold that Yahweh and El are cast as separate deities in Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32. This notion has been put forth most recently by Mark S. Smith and the late Simon B. Parker. Mormon scholarship often references the writings of Margaret Barker in this regard as well. According to Smith, Parker, and Barker, passages like Deuteronomy 32:8–9 have Yahweh as a son of El-Elyon. Utilizing these sources, LDS scholars state:

Yahweh was preeminent among the sons of El in the Israelite conception. The gods of this heavenly council were assigned to be the gods of various nations (Deuteronomy 32:8), and Yahweh was the god of Israel. As Israelite thought developed, El as the Father receded into the background, and Yahweh continued to gain in prominence.²⁰

20. Brant A. Gardner, “Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon’s Book,” 2003, www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences (accessed 6 November 2006).

In the earliest Israelite conception, according to this view, father El had a divine son named Jehovah or Yahweh. El, or Elyon (“the Highest” or “Most High”), and Yahweh were distinct. Indeed, the apparent original reading of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 . . . seems to indicate a number of “sons of El,” among whom Yahweh was the most prominent. . . .

Gradually, it seems, El faded into the background as Yahweh, his preeminent son, came to the fore.²¹

As a son, Yahweh was a created being. Mormon scholarship finds evidence for this in the material of Ugarit since El was the father-creator of the other gods, along with his wife, Asherah. In fact, Mormon scholars argue that the biblical El (the Father of Yahweh) was himself created on the basis of Ugaritic religion, which has El being fathered by still older gods.²² The rise of Yahweh as preeminent son is important to Mormon theology since Latter-day Saints hold that Jesus was the incarnation of Yahweh. Evangelicals would say the same thing, but Mormonism’s perspective on this is related to a distinction between EL and Yahweh.

In terms of an evaluation of the separateness of El and Yahweh, Latter-day Saint scholars have too blithely accepted the positions of Smith, Parker, and Barker. All is not nearly as tidy as they propose. I have detailed the weaknesses of this idea elsewhere, and so I offer only a few observations here.²³

First, the separation of El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 in part depends on the decision to take the *kî* of 32:9 as adversative, thereby denoting some contrast between Elyon of 32:8 and Yahweh of

21. Daniel C. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses 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 Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 492, 493, emphasis removed.

22. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 489. On the “olden gods,” see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 40–41; *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 641–45.

23. Michael S. Heiser, “Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8–9 and Psalm 82?” *HIPHIL* 3 (2006); available at www.see-j.net/Default.aspx?tabid=77 (accessed 15 March 2007).

32:9 (“*However* [*kî*], Yahweh’s portion is his people”).²⁴ Other scholars, however, consider the *kî* of 32:9 to be emphatic: “*And lo* [*kî*], Yahweh’s portion is his people.”²⁵ Other scholars accept the adversative use but do not separate El and Yahweh in the passage.²⁶ Since scholarship on this construction lacks consensus, conclusions based on the adversative syntactical choice are not secure.

Second, Ugaritic scholars have noted that the title “Most High” (*ʿlyōn* or the shorter *ʿl*) is never used of El in the Ugaritic corpus.²⁷ In point of fact it is Baal, a *second-tier deity*, who twice receives this title as the ruler of the gods.²⁸ LDS scholars who often refer to Yahweh as the second-tier deity under El/ʿēlōhîm have not accounted for this fact. The point here is to rebut the argument that the mere occurrence of the term *ʿelyōn* certainly points to El in Deuteronomy 32:8–9. Due to the well-established attribution of Baal epithets to Yahweh, the title *ʿelyōn* could conceivably point directly to Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8–9. It is also worth recalling that if Smith is correct that Yahweh and El were merged by the eighth century BCE due to the transferal of Asherah to Yahweh as consort, then a Yahweh-El fusion had occurred before Deuteronomy was composed. Hence it would have been possible for the author of Deuteronomy to have Yahweh as the head of the divine council. Indeed, what point would the Deuteronomic author have had

24. Italics are for emphasis. For the arguments for an adversative ׀, see James Muihlenburg, “The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle ׀ in the Old Testament,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 139–40; and Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” 132 n. 28.

25. Italics are for emphasis. See Anton Schoors, “The Particle ׀,” *Old Testament Studies* 21 (1981): 240–53; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 303; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 791 (n. 9a-a), 796.

26. Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 159–60, 363–74, esp. 373.

27. Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1990), 276; Nicholas Wyatt, “The Titles of the Ugaritic Storm-God,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 24 (1992): 419; Eric E. Elnes and Patrick D. Miller, “Elyon,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 294.

28. See KTU 1.16:III.6, 8; Wyatt, “Ugaritic Storm-God,” 419. Peterson incorrectly has El as king of the gods (Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 489).

in mind to bring back a Yahweh-El separation that had been rejected two hundred years prior?

Third, although *‘elyôn* is paired with El in the Hebrew Bible, as Eric Elnes and Patrick Miller point out, it is most often an epithet of Yahweh.²⁹ Smith and Parker are of course well aware of this but attribute it to “later tradition,” contending that, in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 the title of Elyon should be associated with El distinct from Yahweh. Again, this would be most curious if Yahweh and El had been fused as early as the eighth century. In this regard, it is interesting that other texts as early as the eighth century speak of Yahweh performing the same deeds credited to *‘elyôn* in Deuteronomy 32:8–9. For example, Isaiah 10:13 has Yahweh in control of the boundaries of the nations.³⁰ It appears that the presupposition of an early Yahweh and El separation requires the exegete to argue for “a later tradition” at this point.

Fourth, separating El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 is internally inconsistent within Deuteronomy 32 and Deuteronomy at large. This assertion is demonstrated by the two preceding verses, 6 and 7. Those two verses attribute no less than five well-recognized El epithets to Yahweh, demonstrating that the redactors who fashioned Deuteronomy recognized the union of El with Yahweh, as one would expect at this point in Israel’s religion.³¹

29. Elnes and Miller, “Elyon,” 296.

30. Jos Luyten, “Primeval and Eschatological Overtones in the Song of Moses (DT 32, 1–43),” in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*, ed. Norbert Lohfink (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1985), 342.

31. See Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 360–61. These verses clearly contain elements drawn from ancient descriptions of El and attribute them to Yahweh. At Ugarit El is called *‘ab ‘adm* (“father of mankind”; KTU 1.14:I.37, 43) and *‘tr ‘il ‘abh ‘il mkl dyknnh* (“Bull El his father, El the king who establishes him”; KTU 1.3:V.35–36; 1.4:I.4–6). Yahweh is described as the “father” (*‘ābikā*) who “established you” (*yēkōnēnekā*). Yahweh is also the one who “created” Israel (*qānekā*) in verse six. The root **qny* denoting El as creator is found in the Karatepe inscription’s appeal to *‘l qn ‘rṣ* (“El, creator of the earth”; Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, 4th ed., Band 1 [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979]; the text cited is KAI 26.III.18–19). At Ugarit the verb occurs in the El epithet, *qny w‘adn ‘ilm* (“creator and lord of the gods”; KTU 1.3:V.9), and Baal calls El *qny* (“our creator”; KTU 1.10:III.5). Genesis 14:19, 22 also attributes this title to El. Deuteronomy 32:7 references the *yēmôt ‘ōlām* (“ages past”) and *šēnôt dōr-wādōr* (“the years of many generations”), which cor-

Last, but not least in importance, the idea of Yahweh receiving Israel as his allotted nation from his Father El is internally inconsistent in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 4:19–20, a passage recognized by all who comment on these issues as an explicit parallel to 32:8–9, the text informs us that it was Yahweh who “allotted” (*hlq*) the nations to the host of heaven and who “took” (*lqh*) Israel as his own inheritance (cf. Deuteronomy 9:26, 29; 29:25). Neither the verb forms nor the ideas are passive. Israel was not *given* to Yahweh by El, which is the picture that scholars who separate El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32 want to fashion. In view of the close relationship of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 to Deuteronomy 4:19–20, it is more consistent to have Yahweh taking Israel for his own terrestrial allotment by sovereign act as Lord of the council.

In summary, the Mormon material I have read on this issue tells me quite clearly that the matter has not been closely analyzed. Latter-day Saint scholars have too quickly assumed that Smith, Parker, and Barker have settled the issue. They have not.

- Presupposition 3: We must use seventeenth-century English vocabulary to define an ancient Semitic worldview.

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

respond, respectively, to El’s description (*ʿlm*; Mitchell Dahood, with Tadeusz Penar, “Ugaritic-Hebrew Parallel Pairs,” in *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Loren R. Fisher, F. Brent Knutson, Donn F. Morgan [Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1972], 294–95) and title (*ʿab šnm*, “father of years”; KTU 1.6:I.36; 1.17:VI.49) at Ugarit. Since the El epithets of Deuteronomy 32:6–7 are well known to scholars of Israelite religion, those who argue that Yahweh and El are separate deities in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 are left to explain why the redactor of verses 6–7 would unite Yahweh and El and in the next stroke separate them. Those who crafted the text of Deuteronomy 32 would have either expressed diametrically oppositional views of Yahweh’s status in consecutive verses, or have allowed a presumed original separation of Yahweh and El to stand in the text—while adding verses 6–7 in which the names describe a single deity. It is difficult to believe that the scribes were this careless, unskilled, or confused. If they were at all motivated by an intolerant monotheism one would expect this potential confusion to have been quickly removed.

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 seventeenth century *not* as an antonym to *polytheism*, but to *atheism*.³² 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 a return to its original meaning.

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 postexilic stages.³³ 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 that all gods are species-equals and that the elevation of one god is due to sociopolitical factors—not theological nuancing. Quoting Max Müller's seminal work on the subject, Michiko 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,' and not limited by the powers of any other gods."³⁴ Müller called this idea "belief in single gods, . . .

32. MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism,"* 1–21.

33. For these terms and their discussion, see Juha Pakkala, *Intolerant Monolatry in the Deuteronomistic History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 1–19, 224–33; MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism,"* 21–71.

34. Michiko Yusa, "Henotheism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6:3913. Yusa is quoting from F. Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion* (1881; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1976), 2:136.

a worship of one god after another.”³⁵ Theophile J. Meek referred to preexilic Israelite religion as both henotheistic and monolatrous,³⁶ 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 sociopolitical 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 the proclamation that Yahweh was unique.”³⁷ 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.

35. Yusa, “Henotheism,” 6:3913, quoting Müller, *Selected Essays*, 137.

36. Theophile J. Meek, “Monotheism and the Religion of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 61 (1942): 21–43.

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

In my judgment, it is not difficult to demonstrate that the writers of the Hebrew Bible held a firm, uncompromising belief in Yahweh’s “species-uniqueness” among the other gods assumed to exist. In briefest terms, the statements in the canonical text (poetic or otherwise) inform the reader that, for the biblical writer, Yahweh was an *ʾēlōhîm*, but no other *ʾēlōhîm* was Yahweh—and never was nor could be. This notion allows for the existence of other *ʾēlōhîm* 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—both in heaven and in earth.

At this juncture I would expect Mormon scholars to ask a fair question: on what grounds can this description of species-uniqueness be established? That will be a focus in topic 3, but first I will deal with one more presupposition.

- Presupposition 4: The word *ʾēlōhîm* necessarily speaks of the ontological traits of the God of Israel, thereby tagging the word with “species-exclusivity.”

We have unfortunately become accustomed to talking and writing about the word *ʾēlōhîm* with imprecision. Since the word is often used as a proper noun in the Hebrew Bible, and since we have used a modern term like *monotheism* to define what Israelites believed, letting the text say what it plainly says—that there are multiple *ʾēlōhîm*—has become a painful, fearful experience for evangelicals. This phobia can be (and should be) cured by letting the text of the Hebrew Bible hold sway over our theology.

The facts of the text are straightforward. There are a number of different entities called *ʾēlōhîm* in the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh is an *ʾēlōhîm*; in fact, he is called *hāʾēlōhîm* (“the God”) when compared to other *ʾēlōhîm* (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:35). There are also *ʾēlōhîm* (“sons of the Most High/sons of God”) who are not Yahweh (e.g., Psalm 82:1, 6). Demons (*šēdîm*) are referred to as *ʾēlōhîm* (Deuteronomy 32:17), as are the departed human dead (1 Samuel 28:13). Other than the *malʾāk yhw̄h* (“Angel of Yahweh”), there are no instances where

a *malʾāḱ* is described as ʾēlohîm, except in the mouth of a pagan king (Daniel 3:25–28), which cannot constitute a sound source of Israelite theology. On no occasion are *malʾāḱîm* described as ʾēlohîm. The only passage where this might even be possible is Genesis 35:7, read against the backdrop of Jacob's flight from Esau. I will outline various reasons that this option is implausible under the next topic in conjunction with the *malʾāḱ yhwh*. Aside from this sole entity, then, *malʾāḱ* is a purely functional term and not a species term. However, if that is the case, it would only mean that some ʾēlohîm function as messengers, and so we are still talking about ʾēlohîm despite the absence of a specific reference.³⁸ This would make sense given the table below.

Mormon theology would have us embrace the idea that all ʾēlohîm are one—that is, sharing the same essence. The fact that a variety of persons or entities are called ʾēlohîm in the text would be seen as support for this, but I disagree. My understanding of ʾēlohîm terminology follows, and I will utilize this understanding under the next topic as I address Mormon interpretation of ʾēlohîm terminology. For this topic, I want to focus on the elasticity of the term ʾēlohîm and Yahweh's species-uniqueness.

The text informs us that, rather than a species term, ʾēlohîm is a term that denotes a higher semantic level. In the following table I have tried to illustrate the meaning of ʾēlohîm on its own terms and by opposition to real entities that are not ʾēlohîm:

38. Mormons understand gods and angels to be “gradations” of the same species. Barry R. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” review of “Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness,” by Paul Owen, *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 215–58; FARMS materials are available online at farms.byu.edu. I have not seen any biblical evidence from the text that establishes this. I assume it to be a guess at parsing the relationship of nonhuman beings found in the Bible.

Table 1. Beings That Are Real/That Exist

Beings That by Nature Occupy the Earthly Plane of Reality	Beings That by Nature Occupy the Spiritual Plane of Reality
(beings that, when mature, by nature have visible corporeality—e.g., “flesh and bone”)	(beings that by nature do not have visible corporeality, but that may or may not have materiality, depending on whether they are created beings) ³⁹
Terrestrial Life	ʿĒlōhīm
Within the “higher” term one finds “species-differentiation” Plants Animals (some with <i>nepheš</i>) Humans ⁴⁰ (flesh + <i>nepheš</i>)	(Israelite) YHWH-EL ⁴¹ Sons of God ⁴² Demons ⁴³ Human disembodied dead ⁴⁴

39. ʿĒlōhīm is a “plane of reality” term—it denotes a being’s primary or proper (but not necessarily exclusive) “place of residence.” For example, Yahweh is still omnipresent but is frequently spoken of having a throne “somewhere.” Demons seek bodies to possess. The sons of God and the ʿĒlōhīm/angels of Genesis 18–19 took corporeal form. Therefore, ʿĒlōhīm may take on flesh and bone, but their intrinsic nature does not include either. Humans get to see the other side in ecstatic experiences, and the disembodied dead can be contacted and appear on the earthly plane.

40. No human being has any unique quality or attribute that no other human had or has. Hence, there is no division of species or species-uniqueness under the broader term *human*. Though unique (cloning excepted), DNA does not produce another species, only variation within a species.

41. Yahweh is an ʿĒlōhīm, but no other ʿĒlōhīm are Yahweh. Yahweh is *hāʿĒlōhīm*.

42. “Sons” of the Most High = sons of Yahweh, if indeed Yahweh and Elyon are the same, which the text (in my judgment) clearly indicates. These are of lower ontological status than Yahweh since they are created. They also have a lower status in Yahweh’s bureaucracy (cf. the patriarchal or royal house analogy). These “sons” (called so because of their creation) are ʿĒlōhīm, and some (at least) serve Yahweh as messengers (*malʾākīm*). In this way, the three-tiered (some want four) bureaucracy common to divine council discussion is coherent. Lastly, these ʿĒlōhīm may be loyal to Yahweh or fallen. The fact that they are rebellious and evil does not remove them from this reality plane.

43. Demons are of lower ontological status than Yahweh since they are created. If demons originated as described in extracanonical literature such as *1 Enoch* (and they might, since it appears the biblical material on the Rephaim is analogous, with or without an emendation to *nplym* in Ezekiel 32:27), then they are of lower ontological class than the “sons” class above since they would have had a human parent.

44. The disembodied dead exist on the “spiritual plane” (the “other side”) and so are called ʿĒlōhīm. This is quite consistent with the rest of ancient Near Eastern material.

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 preexistence 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.

To summarize this topic, I wish to stress two important facts: (1) The idea of an evolution in Israelite religion toward monotheism is a commonly held position, but it lacks coherence and explanatory power when it comes to the canonical text and later Jewish material. (2) The idea that El and Yahweh were once separate deities also lacks coherence. It remains to be seen, and likely depends on LDS input, how essential those ideas are to their beliefs. If they are essential, then their foundation lacks the kind of certitude I would think they are seeking.

Topic 3: The Notion of a Godhead in Israelite and Jewish Thought (items A5, A7, B4, B6)

Latter-day Saints accept the idea of a godhead, but one that differs somewhat from traditional Christian orthodoxy. Some statements from LDS scholars are illustrative:

We accept, indeed devoutly affirm, the oneness, the inexpressibly rich unity, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We could even, I suppose, employ the words *Trinity* and *trinitarianism*—as Elder James E. Talmage’s hugely influential 1899 work on *The Articles of Faith* in fact does—though we typically do not. The Bible *testifies* to this important truth; and so, even more explicitly, do the peculiarly Latter-day Saint scriptures. We do not (borrowing a description of polytheism that Paul Owen cites) “postulate different gods to account for different kinds of events.” We simply feel no need to endorse the doctrine of ontological unity worked out, most prominently, at Nicea.⁴⁵

45. Daniel C. Peterson, “Historical Concreteness, or Speculative Abstraction?” *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): xvii; remarks at the debate organized under the

Latter-day Saints know nothing of an ontological “substance” to “divide”; we resolutely decline to “confound” the “persons.” We affirm that the Father and the Son are distinct personages of flesh and bone. The preincarnate Jesus was revealed to ancient Israel as the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. . . . *Elohim*, of course, is plural in form. And, sometimes, it is clearly plural in meaning. But even when it refers to a single divine person, it implies plurality.⁴⁶

First, there is only one God because the Father is the supreme monarch of our universe. There is no other God to whom we could switch our allegiance, and there never will be such a being. He is “the Eternal God of all other gods” (D&C 121:32). Elder Boyd K. Packer writes: “The Father *is* the one true God. *This* thing is certain: no one will ever ascend above Him; no one will ever replace Him. Nor will anything ever change the relationship that we, His literal offspring, have with Him. He is Elohim, the Father. He is God; of Him there *is* only one. We revere our Father and our God; we *worship* Him.”⁴⁷

Second, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so unified in mind, will, love, and covenant that they can collectively be called “one God” (see 2 Nephi 31:21; D&C 20:28). . . . Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained: “Monotheism is the doctrine or belief that there is but one God. If this is properly interpreted to mean that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—each of whom is a separate and distinct godly personage—are one God, meaning one Godhead, then true saints are monotheists.”⁴⁸

auspices of the Society of Evangelical Philosophers, in conjunction with the joint annual national meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (the AAR/SBL), 17 November 2001. The citation of Paul Owen comes from “Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness,” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 278. Underlining is my own.

46. Peterson, “Historical Concreteness, or Speculative Abstraction?” xvii–xviii.

47. Citing Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 293, emphasis in original.

48. Citing Bruce R. McConkie, “Monotheism,” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 511.

Third, even though an innumerable host of beings may be gods and though many more will become such, there is still only one God because all of them are unified in essentially the same way as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the fact that the Father has a father and that his sons and daughters may be deified has no particular bearing on the question of whether there is one God.⁴⁹

While we believe in the existence of many separate beings who are correctly termed “Gods,” in a very real sense they are all one. . . .

. . . Informed Latter-day Saints see Elohim and Jehovah as divine name-titles that are *usually* applied to specific members of the Godhead but can sometimes be applied to any or all of them.⁵⁰

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ and credal Christians affirm together that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. However, since Latter-day Saints reject the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* [which would make the Father ontologically unique], we can also consistently assert that Jesus is subordinate in rank and glory to the Father and was created by the Father.⁵¹

The acceptance by Latter-day Saints of the anthropomorphic God of the Bible requires us to reject the Greek notion of the *absolute* uniqueness of the one God. That God is in some sense unique and that there is a “Creator/creature distinction” are facts taken for granted by Latter-day Saints, but to us this does not imply some unbridgeable “ontological gap.”⁵²

I will try to summarize what seems to be articulated in these passages:

1. There is one God (the Father).

49. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” 218–19.

50. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” 220–21.

51. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” 251.

52. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” 246.

2. There is one Godhead.
3. Any being called a god in scripture is rightly a member of the one Godhead.
4. All gods in the Godhead are in total unity.
5. This unity does not refer to “essence,” and so gods in the unified Godhead may be different in “glory” and “rank” from each other and from the Father.
6. The Father is not ontologically unique; ontology, in fact, is a misguided focus when it comes to the Godhead since the issue is unity of the Godhead.
7. As such, Jesus and the Spirit can be seen as truly God and part of the Godhead, but they could both have been created by the Father.

These thoughts are naturally hard to accept for the evangelical who is schooled in the traditional orthodox Christian perspective. Rather than go through each one as a systematic theologian in a rebuttal attempt, I want to stay focused on the Hebrew Bible and the divine council. I will also try to go to the heart of these issues, and not to peripheral problems, such as the Latter-day Saint view requiring that demons are part of the Godhead, since Deuteronomy 32:17 has demons as *ʾēlohîm*. This situation is not remedied by saying that demons are rebellious or fallen *ʾēlohîm*, or even that demons are on Yahweh’s leash, so to speak. They are still *ʾēlohîm* and thus still part of the Godhead in Mormon theology. Hence we have rebellious and evil members in the Mormon Godhead. It may be possible, though, that Mormonism’s “Godhead” is something equivalent to my “spiritual plane of reality.” I cannot see that as consistent with Mormonism’s objections to traditional Trinitarianism, though. I also do not know enough about Mormonism’s demonology to know if the concept of demons as *ʾēlohîm* is a problem for them in some other way.

My own view is that there is a better way to parse all this—by restricting talk of a godhead to Yahweh and Yahweh’s other hypostatic “selves”—what we would commonly think of as the “Son” and the “Spirit.”⁵³ I do not consider these “selves” to be mere personified

53. I use *hypostasis* because the vocabulary is found elsewhere. I am still wondering if there is not a better term.

attributes. These other selves are Yahweh in that they are ontologically identical. They are not the Father, though, and so in that sense it may (perhaps awkwardly) be said that they are not Yahweh. I think it better to say that they share Yahweh's essence, but they are also independent (but not autonomous) personal beings distinct from Yahweh.

Toward articulating my view of how this all works with respect to the Hebrew Bible and the Israelite divine council, the first step is to return to the Yahweh-El (Elyon) issue. As you recall, El was the "Father" god at Ugarit, having birthed 70 sons with Athirat, his wife. These sons are "sons of El" (*bn ʾil/bn ʾilm*)⁵⁴ and are referred to as "gods" (*ʾilm*).⁵⁵ One of El's sons (though his lineage is mysterious) is Baal. This divine family is described via patriarchal motifs⁵⁶ and royal house/rulership motifs.⁵⁷

Anyone who does serious work in Israelite religion knows that the biblical writers attribute epithets and attributes of *both* Ugaritic El and Baal to Yahweh.⁵⁸ This is why such notions as a separation of El and Yahweh as Father and Son inherently spring *not* from the data, but from the presupposition of an evolutionary trajectory in Israelite religion. A separation of deities must be posited and then forced upon texts like Deuteronomy 32:8–9, despite the data (even in the same passage) to the contrary. As a result of the presupposition, when the text does not support the presumption, appeals are made to the redactor, or to the material being "late," added to erase the evidence of two separate gods—never minding the fact that in Second Temple Jewish

54. Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, "phr" (*DULAT* 1:225–27). KTU 1.16.V:10–25; 1.40.R:25, 41–42; 1.65.R: 1–3; 1.162: 16–17; cf. Mullen, "Divine Assembly," 215.

55. *DULAT* 1:48–51.

56. J. David Schloen, "The Patrimonial Household in the Kingdom of Ugarit: A Weberian Analysis of Ancient Near Eastern Society" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995); J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

57. Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); Conrad E. L'Heureux, *Rank among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ba'al, and the Rephaim* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

58. See John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 13–41; 91–127; and Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 19–56.

literature like that from Qumran we have gods all over the place in council. There is a better view.

Table 2. A Comparison of the Divine Council at Ugarit and of Israel

The Divine Council at Ugarit		The Divine Council of Israel	
“slot 1”	El → (high sovereign, but not called “Most High”) ↓ Baal	→ YHWH ↗	“slot 1”
“slot 2”	Coregent or “deputy” of El; the “ruler/king of the gods” (<i>ilm</i>)/the “Most High.” The coregency was fought for among the sons of El, and so the coregent is a created son of El who acts as the special agent of El—fights his battles and rules the gods as appointed authority over the other lower-ranking divine rulers (<i>mlkm</i>) of the earth, the sons/princes of El.	Where is the coregent? Who is the second god, the chief agent of Yahweh, who is above all the other sons?	“slot 2”

Most critical scholars would say that El and Baal are “merged” in Yahweh. I would prefer to say it another way: the biblical authors believed the creator, sovereign, and kingship roles of El and Baal were attributes of a single entity—that is, Israel’s council could allow for only one creator, one sovereign, and one king of all gods. In my dissertation I delineated this proposal: Because of its commitment to Yahweh’s “species-uniqueness,” Israelite religion could allow for only one God with the above attributes, yet it retained or reenvisioned the high sovereign, coregent structure of the divine council by making one critical change. Who occupies the “second god, coregent” slot in Israelite religion under Yahweh? Why, Yahweh, of course.

Table 3. A Comparison of the Divine Council at Ugarit and of Israel with Yahweh’s Coregent

The Divine Council at Ugarit		The Divine Council of Israel	
“slot 1”	<p>El →</p> <p>(high sovereign, but not called “Most High”)</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Baal</p>	<p>YHWH</p> <p>↕</p>	“slot 1”
“slot 2”	<p>Coregent or “deputy” of El; the “ruler/king of the gods” (<i>ilm</i>)/the “Most High.”</p> <p>The coregency was fought for among the sons of El, and so the coregent is a created son of El who acts as the special agent of El—fights his battles and rules the gods as appointed authority over the other lower-ranking divine rulers (<i>mlkm</i>) of the earth, the sons/princes of El.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>The Angel of Yahweh in whom was the Name (Exodus 23:20–23; Genesis 32:22–32; cf. Hosea 12:4–5 [Heb]; Genesis 48:15–16)</p> <p>The “Glory-Man” on God’s throne (Ezekiel 1:26–27; Exodus 24:9–11; 33:7–34:5; Isaiah 6)</p> <p>The Word. The Word is identified as Yahweh; cf. the “vision” language, not just auditory (Genesis 15:1–6). Yahweh is the Word that came and “stood” before Samuel; cf. the vision language, especially the verb “appear” (1 Samuel 3). Note the Word is identified as Yahweh, and then he touches Jeremiah with his hand (Jeremiah 1:1–10).</p> </div> <p>For humankind’s benefit, Yahweh chooses to make himself known by means that are detectable to the human senses. As uncreated spirit (Isaiah 43:10–12; John 4:24) and “glory,” his essence is undetectable without intermediate means. These means also serve to protect humans from the full essence.</p>	“slot 2”

I would like to unpack the table and articulate why my assertion that Israel saw Yahweh as species-unique can be justified via the text. As I have noted above, I would expect Mormon scholars to want to know on what grounds I base my estimation that Yahweh is species-unique. This is important, for if Yahweh is to be seen as species-unique, then my notion that Israel's theology required that Yahweh fill both the head and coregent slots in the divine council is also established. And the fact that there are, in effect, two Yahweh figures occupying these slots in turn establishes an Israelite godhead, for both slots are filled by the same essence. In turn, establishing that two beings who are ontologically the same (Yahweh and his coregent) are at the top of the council will accurately account for the biblical data concerning the relationship of Yahweh to the other *ʾēlōhîm*, something I do not believe Mormon doctrine accomplishes coherently. I agree with Barry Bickmore when he says that we ought to be concerned more with *how* God is unique, as opposed to *whether* he is unique. What follows addresses that concern.⁵⁹

There are five lines of evidence for Yahweh being species-unique.

1. *Yahweh is said to be the creator of all other members of the heavenly host.* In order to comprehend this argument, we must establish that the Hebrew Bible at times uses the phrase *heavenly host* of actual animate beings. The following verses in Deuteronomy are relevant:

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 (*ʾēlōhîm*) and bowed down (*yištaḥû*) before them, the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven (*šēbāʾ haššāmayim*), which I have forbidden . . . (Deuteronomy 17:2–3)

They turned to the service of other gods (*ʾēlōhîm*) and worshiped (*yištaḥû*) them, gods (*ʾēlōhîm*) whom they had not

59. Bickmore, "Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism," 258.

experienced and whom He [God] had not allotted⁶⁰ to them.
(Deuteronomy 29:25)

It is clear that Deuteronomy 17:2–3 and 29:25 refer to the events described in Deuteronomy 4:19–20 and 32:8–9, when, in conjunction with the Babel incident, the Most High apportioned the nations among the sons of God and punitively ordained that they be the gods of those nations, necessitating they return to the true God through his nation of priests—Israel.⁶¹ These are the *ʔēlōhīm* being judged in Psalm 82.

As many scholars have demonstrated, we are dealing with more than idols here. If Deuteronomy 4:19–20 and 32:8–9 refer to idols and not to the divine beings represented by idols, then we have God judging inanimate objects for badly administering the affairs of the nations. And it would hardly make sense for Yahweh to sentence pieces of wood and stone to die like mortals. And since Yahweh is the

60. The Hebrew word translated “allotted” is *hālaq* and serves to link this text with Deuteronomy 4:19–20; 32:8–9, which have Yahweh “allotting” (*hālaq*) the nations and the gods/host of heaven to each other and taking Israel as his own “allotment” (*hēleq*).

61. Reading “sons of God” with LXX and Qumran in 32:8. As I noted in a 2001 article, there are no good text-critical reasons to read *bēnē yiśrāʾēl* with MT at the end of verse eight (Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” 52–74 [esp. pp. 52–59]). The words *בני אל* are not an option for what was behind the Septuagint reading, as demonstrated by the Qumran support for the Hebrew text underlying the unrevised Septuagint. Manuscript 4QDt^g has spaces for additional letters following the *ל* of its [] *בני אלוהים*. Second, 4QDt^h clearly reads *בני אלוהים*. See Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 156; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 269; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 514–18; Patrick W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut. 32) from Qumran,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 136 (1954) 12–15; Julie Ann Duncan, “A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV: 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^d, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^f, 4QDt^g” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1989); Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4 IX: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 75–79. Not only is the reading of MT text critically inferior, but its content results in logical problems. As Tigay notes, “This reading raises a number of difficulties. Why would God base the number of nations on the number of Israelites? . . . Why would He have based the division on their number at the time they went to Egypt, an event not mentioned in the poem? In addition, verse 9, which states that God’s portion was Israel, implies a contrast: Israel was God’s share while the other peoples were somebody else’s share, but verse 8 fails to note whose share they were” (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 302).

creator of the heavenly host (see below), if they are idols, then Yahweh is an idol maker.

I am not arguing that the Hebrew Bible always means real divine beings when using the vocabulary of the heavenly host. While the Old Testament at times has biblical figures referring to idols as “gods”⁶²—something inevitable given the behavior of the Gentile nations—it is *not* coherent to argue that the Old Testament writer *always* (or even mostly) meant “idols” when writing of plural *ʾēlōhîm* or the “host of heaven.”

It is also unwarranted to argue that all the heavenly host terminology can only mean the chunks of rock and balls of gas in the cosmos.⁶³ It was commonly believed in the ancient world (Israelites included) that the heavenly bodies were either animate beings or were inhabited or controlled by animate beings.⁶⁴ Hence in scripture there is overlap with respect to just who or what is referred to by the terms *sun*, *moon*, *stars*, and *heavenly host*. However, an overlap is not an erasure of one element of the conception.

It is clear from the above passages in Deuteronomy that the sun, moon, and stars are explicitly referred to as “other gods” (*ʾēlōhîm ʾāḥērîm*), not as idols. This is also clear from passages like Job 38:4–7, where the sons of God (*bēnê ʾēlōhîm*) are referred to as stars (*kôkēbê ḥôqer*). The classic divine council passage, 1 Kings 22, also 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 (*šēbāʾ haššāmayîm*) standing beside him on his right hand and on his left. 20 and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a

62. For example, 1 Kings 14:9. Such statements need to be balanced with others, such as 2 Kings 19:18.

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

64. Fabrizio Lelli, “Stars,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 809–15; Ida Zatelli, “Astrology and the Worship of the Stars in the Bible,” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 86–99; Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1970).

spirit (*hārûahî*) came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' 22 And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go 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." (1 Kings 22:19–23 ESV)

The point here is that Yahweh is not holding council with physical chunks of stone and balls of gas.

All of this is important for noting passages like Nehemiah 9:6 and Psalm 148:1–5:

6 You are Yahweh, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, and all their host (*kol-šēbāʾām*), 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 (*šēbāʾ haššāmayim*) worships you. (Nehemiah 9:6)

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!⁶⁵ 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts (*kol-šēbāʾāw*)! 3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars (*kol-kôkēbê ʾôr*)! 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. (Psalm 148:1–5)

Notice that in Nehemiah 9:6, Yahweh alone is the creator. None of the other gods have creative power, marking Yahweh as distinct. The parallelism in Psalm 148 makes clear the conceptual overlap in that it has the heavenly hosts—sun, moon, and stars—worshipping and praising Yahweh, their creator.

65. The phrase *in the heights* has divine council overtones. See Norman C. Habel, "He Who Stretches Out the Heavens," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972): 417–18; and Korpel, *Rift in the Clouds*, 376–82.

2. *Yahweh was considered preexistent to all gods. As such, contrary to Latter-day Saint beliefs, he had no parents.* The text of Isaiah 43:10–12 is straightforward in this regard:

“You are my witnesses,” declares Yahweh, “and my servants whom I have chosen, that you may know, and believe me, and understand that I am he. Before me no god (ʿēl) was formed, and after me, there shall not be [any].”

It is most coherent to consider ʿēl generic, and so the writer is telling us that no god was created prior to Yahweh. It would be awkward for ʿēl to be a proper name here since Yahweh received El epithets, but the point would still be interesting: there was no creator god (El was the Creator god) before Yahweh (i.e., he is the only god who can claim this power).

It should be noted that verse 10 does not contradict the clear statements elsewhere in scripture that Yahweh created the divine members of the heavenly host. The verse does not deny that Yahweh created any ʿēlōhîm. Rather, it asserts there will be no such god as Yahweh to follow. If the objects of creation were what was intended to be negated, we would expect a plural form of *hyh*, not the singular *yihyeh*, or some other negated plural construction.

3. *Yahweh has the power to strip the other ʿēlōhîm of their immortality.*

6 I said, “you are gods (ʿēlōhîm), sons of the Most High (ʿelyôn), all of you”. 7 Therefore you shall die as humankind, and you shall fall as one of the princes. (Psalm 82:6–7)

If Yahweh did not have superior power, how could he do this? If Yahweh is not ontologically distinct and unique, whence does this superior power derive? If Mormons postulate that the power derives from superior status or authority, how was such status or authority obtained? Who gave it—another ontologically parallel god?

4. *Yahweh is referred to as hāʿēlōhîm in comparative statements, while no other god or group of gods is ever spoken of in such a manner.*

Incomparability statements point to Yahweh's ontological distinctiveness. Consider the passages below:

You have been shown, in order to know that Yahweh, he is *the* god (par excellence; *hā'ēlōhîm*). Beside him there is no other. (Deuteronomy 4:35)

As Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor note (quoting Muraoka), "this construction has 'selective-exclusive' force . . . the subject/focus is singled out and contrasted with other possible or actual alternatives."⁶⁶ This use is especially striking in 1 Kings 18:21, where Elijah challenges Baal and his worshippers by saying, "If Yahweh is *the* (true) God (*hā'ēlōhîm*), follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word."

Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (par excellence; *hā'ēlōhîm*) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. (Deuteronomy 4:39)

For Yahweh your God, he is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God (*hā'ēl*), who is not partial and takes no bribe. (Deuteronomy 10:17)

That all the peoples of the earth may know that Yahweh is *the* God (par excellence; *hā'ēlōhîm*); there is no other. (1 Kings 8:60)

Who is like you, Yahweh, among the gods (*bā'ēlîm*)? (Exodus 15:11)

For who in the clouds can be compared to Yahweh? Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God (*bēnê 'ēlîm*)? (Psalm 89:6; Hebrew, v. 7)

Latter-day Saints simply cannot have it both ways. If these denial statements do not rule out the reality of other *'ēlōhîm*, as they obviously cannot in view of Psalm 82 and other passages, then it cannot be coherently denied that that points to Yahweh's uniqueness. In

66. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 297.

short, the statements have to mean *something*, and if it is argued that the something is authority, we are back to asking from whence such authority was given or taken.

I would also add that the use of *hāʿēlōhîm* in incomparability statements demonstrates that the earlier claim that “even when [*ʿēlōhîm*] refers to a single divine person, it implies plurality” is nonsensical. Bringing that statement to some of the verses above illustrates the point:

“You have been shown, in order to know that Yahweh, he is the collective (*hāʿēlōhîm*). Beside him [it would have to be ‘them’ but we have the third-person singular personal pronoun here] there is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:35). How is it coherent to say that “beside the collective there is/are no other”? If all humans and beings on the spiritual plane are *ʿēlōhîm*, what’s the counterpart of the comparison?

5. *The other gods are commanded to worship Yahweh.*

1 Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God (*bēnê ʿēlîm*); ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength! 2 Ascribe to Yahweh the glory of his name; worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness! (Psalm 29:1–2)

You are Yahweh, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, and all their host (*kol-šēbāʿām*), 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 (*šēbāʿ haššāmayim*) worships you. (Nehemiah 9:6)

1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts (*kol-šēbāʿāw*)! 3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars (*kol-kōkēbê ʿôr*)! 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. (Psalm 148:1–5)

7 worship him, all you gods (*ʿēlōhîm*) . . . 9 For you, Yahweh, are most high (*ʿelyôn*) over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods (*ʿēlōhîm*). (Psalm 97:7, 9)

My point here is that if Yahweh is not ontologically different from the other *ʾēlōhîm*, then why does he merit worship? On what basis was it decided that he is worthy of worship and the others are not? An appeal to Yahweh's deliverance (e.g., the Reed Sea) as though Yahweh just did something for Israel that some other god could have pulled off is pointless since the text judges such deliverances to be indicators of Yahweh's matchless power.

These five considerations are powerful testimony to Yahweh's distinctiveness, especially given the exclusivity with which they are articulated in the text. Yahweh shares these attributes and this status with no other *ʾēlōhîm*. Israel's "Yahweh-uniqueness" theology, then, remained intact in this divine council structure since the second power in heaven was also Yahweh. The Angel, the Word, and the Glory-Man are visible representations of the coregent Yahweh, that slot which was occupied by "the Most High Son" in Ugaritic terminology. In a patriarchal model of the council this would be the "firstborn"—the one who is to inherit the status of the patriarch or who functions as the patriarch if need be. In a royal house model, this would be the elect son, the scion, who often functioned as king in other places as though he was the king—and under such conditions, he was the king. This "unique Son" (there was only one) occupying the second slot may also be said to be Yahweh's chief agent (*malʾāk*), distinct from all other divine sons and agents (*malʾākîm*).

There are other hypostasized agents of Yahweh, such as the Name, the hidden Glory (in the cloud), and Wisdom, but these figures are never "seen" and never "appear" as a human form. My godhead within the council idea must include them in some way, and so I parse their status with the above coregent figures as follows. In the Hebrew Bible we have: (1) Yahweh the Father; (2) the visible (and at times corporeal) essence of Yahweh the Father in human form; and (3) the visible essence of Yahweh the Father that is not in human form. The Angel, the Word, and the Glory-Man all appear in human form. The Name, for example, does not. Rather, the Name can be linked to the non-humanoid cloud that fills the temple (the place Yahweh put his Name). The same is true of the hidden Glory. While the Glory could appear in

human form (the Glory-Man), the Glory was more frequently veiled in the cloud. Wisdom is cast as female and cocreator in the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs 8:22–31) because of grammatical gender, but Wisdom is never seen by anyone, as far as the text informs us. Wisdom is also never interchanged with any of the other hypostatized figures of Yahweh.

None of these figures is explicitly linked to the Spirit of God, as far as I have been able to determine. The Name is said to be “in” the Angel, and so there is some similarity to the Spirit’s role elsewhere. The Spirit is also interchanged with the God of Israel on occasion.⁶⁷ The data lead me to believe that the various coregent figures cannot neatly be categorized as “Son” and “Spirit,” to use the terminology frequently found in the New Testament. The role of the coregent slot (the COO) was filled by “other Yahweh” figures in whatever way Yahweh chose to appear. Yahweh the Father (the CEO) functioned as High Sovereign over everything. To return to Ugarit as an analogy, the “Son” aspect of the coregent slot derives from the use of the metaphor of the patriarchal house and royal household. Baal’s roles of warrior, administrator, temple occupant, prince, and vizier were carried out by various manifestations of Yahweh’s essence. These manifestations were detectable by the human senses and often included the simultaneous presence of Yahweh the Father, and so they are not mere “modes.” As a result, I would not say that Israelite religion had a Trinity in the way we typically articulate the Godhead. I would say that the notion of a godhead is part of Israelite religion, and this idea becomes clearer in the progress of revelation.

Topic 4: The “Species-Uniqueness” of the Son/Coregent, Jesus, and the Quotation of Psalm 82 in John 10 (items A8, B8)

Significantly, the New Testament writers link all these coregent figures with Jesus. Jesus is the Word (John 1:1), the incarnated Glory (John 1:14; 17:5, 24), and Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24; cf. Luke 11:49–

67. See, for example, Isaiah 63:8–10, comparing the context and verb lemmas in verse 10 with Psalm 78:40.

51 and Matthew 23:34–36). He was given/bears the Name (John 17:6–12; Revelation 19:12–16) and was thought to be the delivering Angel (Jude 5; cf. Exodus 23:20–23; Judges 2:1–5).⁶⁸ Jesus was also the “Cloud Rider,” a deity title/description of Baal at Ugarit attributed only to Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, the lone exception being the son of man in Daniel 7.

Such identifications would mean that Jesus is in the Israelite Godhead. Second Temple Jewish texts abound with speculation as to the identity of the second power. Jewish writers of that time argued for exalted angels (Michael, Gabriel) and certain Old Testament figures (Moses, Abraham, Adam) in the coregent slot. What made Christianity distinct was the claim that the second power had become a human being, vulnerable to death, and that this human being had walked among them in recent days and had suffered crucifixion at the hands of the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities.

All of what we have discussed in this paper to this point was part of the Jewish thought of the Second Temple period, as my own dissertation and the copious scholarly literature on these subjects have established.⁶⁹ By the time of Jesus's ministry,⁷⁰ Jewish writers committed to monotheism, even upon pain of death, could accept that

68. There is a text-critical issue in Jude 5. The scholarly information on the coregent linkages to Jesus is copious. See for example Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis in the Book of Revelation,” www.iwu.edu/~religion/ejcm/Gieschen.htm (accessed 24 April 2007); Jarl E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Darrell D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994); Aqila H. I. Lee, *From Messiah to Preexistent Son: Jesus' Self-Consciousness and Early Christian Exegesis of Messianic Psalms* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94/3 (2001): 243–84.

69. See the sources in note 64.

70. After the second century and on into the rabbinic era, these ideas became heretical to Jewish teachers and writers. The “standardization” of the Masoretic text and rejection of the LXX occurred at the same time (not coincidentally in my view). See Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Daniel Boyarin, “Two Powers in Heaven; Or, the Making of a Heresy,” in *The*

there was a council of *ʔēlōhîm* in Psalm 82 (cf. the Qumran data) and that there was a second power in heaven who “was Yahweh but wasn’t Yahweh the Father.” Again, I am not saying that Judaism had a Trinity. I am only saying that the necessary concepts and categories were in place. The idea that the traditional Christian articulation derives from Greek philosophy is untrue.⁷¹ The key conceptual elements are certifiably Israelite.

This background is important for interpreting the significance of Jesus’s quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34–35. I have never come across the view I have of this issue in print, and so it seems best to give the full context of Jesus’s quotation in order to clarify my thoughts:

22 And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. 23 And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon’s porch. 24 Then came the Jews round about him, and said to him, “How long are you going to make us doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” 25 Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you believed not: the works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me. 26 But you believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I said to you. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28 And I give to them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who gave *them* to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to pluck

Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 331–70.

71. Interestingly, species-uniqueness is the basis for God’s distinction from the other gods in later Jewish writers. For example, 2 (*Slavonic Apocalypse of 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 do not worship vain gods, gods who did not create the heaven and the earth or any other 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,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:470–71 (the citations are from fragments 1:17; 2:1; 3:3).

them out of my Father's hand. 30 **I and my Father are one.**" 31 Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, "Many good works have I shown you from my Father; for which of those works do you stone me?" 33 The Jews answered him, saying, "For a good work we would not stone you; but for blasphemy; and because that **you, being a man, make yourself God.**" (John 10:22–33)

The quotation of Psalm 82:6 follows:

34 Jesus answered them, "**Is it not written in your law: 'I said, you are gods?'** 35 **If he [God] called them gods, to whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;** 36 **do you say of him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme!'** because **I said, I am the Son of God?** 37 If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. 38 But if I do, though you don't believe me, believe the works: that you may know, and **believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.**" 39 Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand, 40 And went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he abode. 41 And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true. 42 And many believed on him there. (John 10:34–42)

Here is what we can glean without interpretive disagreement:

1. Jesus prefaced his quotation by asserting that he and the Father were one (John 10:30).
2. This claim was regarded as blasphemy in that Jesus was making himself out to be God (John 10:33).
3. In defense of his assertion, Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6. That is, to establish his claim to be God, Jesus went to Psalm 82:6.
4. He follows the quotation with the statement that the Father was in him, and he was in the Father.

The standard view of this quotation is that Jesus was endorsing the human *ʾēlohîm* view and thereby arguing, "I have every right to

call myself divine—you guys can do it as well on the basis of Psalm 82:6.” The problem, of course, is that this amounts to Jesus saying “you mere mortals can call yourself gods, so I can, too.” If this is a defense of his own deity, it is a weak one.

Although Latter-day Saints agree with me that the *ʾēlohîm* in Psalm 82:6 are in fact divine beings, they prefer the human *ʾēlohîm* view for Jesus’s use of Psalm 82:6.⁷² Recall that Latter-day Saints argue that humans are the children of God, who is embodied, based on their understanding of the image of God.⁷³ If Jesus is in fact *not* claiming to be ontologically different than the Jews who were assailing him, the Mormon position is bolstered. This might strike evangelicals as odd, given Jesus’s claim that he and the Father were one (John 10:30), but Latter-day Saints insist that Jesus was claiming to be *a* god, not the Father, citing the absence of the definite article before θεός in verse 33: “you, being a man, make yourself God” (σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὦν ποιεῖς

72. With respect to the disconnect between the psalm’s original meaning and Jesus’s understanding of it, Mormon scholarship rescues Jesus from being in error by appealing to material in the Book of Abraham that resolves the tension (see the discussion in Peterson, “Ye Are Gods,” 541–42). Latter-day Saint scholars reason that the human *ʾēlohîm* view is supportive of their doctrinal affirmation that humans are *ʾēlohîm*. This idea is based on the Mormon understanding of the image of God, and so it would be unfair to say that Mormon theology desperately needs Jesus’s endorsement of the human *ʾēlohîm* view. It certainly helps, though.

73. The reasoning is that since we are created in God’s image and likeness, that must mean we are divine, like him, and he is embodied, like us. Latter-day Saints seek to draw support for this understanding from certain passages that refer to human beings as *ʾēlohîm* or as God’s children (for example, Moses is spoken of as *ʾēlohîm* in Exodus 4:16; 7:1, and the nation of Israel is referred to as Yahweh’s “son” in Exodus 4:23; Hosea 11:1). The trajectories on which this doctrine is built, supposedly bolstered by Barker’s work, are flawed. Mormon writer Brant Gardner notes: “When Margaret Barker describes the nature of the heavenly council, she also notes the key that resolves our problems in understanding Nephi and the subsequent Nephite theology. ‘There are those called sons of El Elyon, sons of El or Elohim, all clearly heavenly beings, and there are those called sons of Yahweh or the Holy One who are human’” (citing Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992], 5 [4]). Barker’s argument proceeds on the assumption that when the Hebrew Bible refers to sons of an El-derivative deity (El, Elyon, Elohim), those sons are heavenly beings. When the text speaks of Yahweh or the “Holy One” having sons, those sons are human beings. Barker’s “crucial distinction” (p. 4) is incorrect since she misses Hosea 1:10, where “sons of the living God (El)” are clearly human beings. The Mormon material I have read has not caught the error and proceeds to make apologetic points on a flawed assumption.

σEAUΤὸν θεόν). That Jesus was claiming to be *a* god would be acceptable for Latter-day Saints since we are all gods by virtue of being created in God's image. But if Jesus held that the Father had ontological superiority, that is another story.

I propose, however, that the *ʾēlōhîm* of Psalm 82 were not human and that Jesus was in fact asserting his *own* unique ontological oneness with the Father. Before defending that thesis, let me first address the notion that John 10:33 has Jesus only claiming to be *a* god. A syntactical search of the Greek New Testament reveals that the identical construction found in John 10:33 occurs elsewhere in contexts referring specifically to God the Father.⁷⁴

The absence of the article, therefore, does not prove the Mormon interpretation. The absence of the article may point to indefiniteness when the subject complement is the lemma θεός (especially when it is plural), but it can also point to a specific, definite entity. Building an interpretation on this argument is a poor strategy.

Returning now to the quotation, the human *ʾēlōhîm* view derives from two assumptions brought to the text: (1) that it is required by the impossibility of there being other *ʾēlōhîm* because of Judeo-Christian monotheism, and (2) that the phrase *to whom the word of God came* refers to the Jews who received the law at Sinai—that is, the Pharisees' forefathers. This paper has already dispensed with the first assumption, so we will move to the latter.

I would suggest that what first needs to be done is to come to terms with what is meant by “the word of God” and who it is that receives that word in Psalm 82:6–7:

74. The search is accomplished via the OpenText.org syntactically tagged Greek New Testament database in the Libronix platform developed by Logos Bible Software, Bellingham, Washington. The search query asks for all clauses where the predicator of the clause can be any finite verbs except εἰμί where the subject complement is the lexeme θεός with no definite article present. Any clause component can intervene between these two elements. Other than John 10:33, the following hits are yielded by the query: Acts 5:29; Galatians 4:8, 9; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Titus 3:8; Hebrews 9:14. It is incoherent within the immediate and broader context of the book in which each hit occurs to translate θεός as “a god.”

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.

The speaker (“I”) in the passage is the God of Israel, the God who is standing in the council in Psalm 82:1 among the *ʾēlohîm*. God announces that the *ʾēlohîm* of the council are his sons, but because of their corruption (vv. 2–5), they will lose their immortality. I believe that Jesus was referring to this utterance when he quoted the psalm, not the Jewish nation receiving the law at Sinai or the revelation that would become the Old Testament. To illustrate the difference in the views:

Table 4. Interpretations of the Word of God

Common Interpretation/ Jesus’s strategy assumes <i>ʾēlohîm</i> are human	My view/ Jesus’s strategy assumes <i>ʾēlohîm</i> are divine
The “word of God that came” = revelation from God at Sinai, or the entire OT	The “word of God that came” = the utterance itself in Psalm 82:6 – the pronouncement from God
“to whom the word of God came” = the Jews at Sinai, or the Jews generally	“to whom the word of God came” = the <i>ʾēlohîm</i> of the divine council in 82:1
Result: the Jews are the “sons of the Most High” and <i>ʾēlohîm</i> so Jesus can call himself an <i>ʾēlohîm</i> as well.	Result: The Jews are not <i>ʾēlohîm</i> , and Jesus reminds his enemies that their scriptures say there are other <i>ʾēlohîm</i> who are divine sons.

Nowhere in Psalm 82 do we have any hint of the Mosaic law, Sinai, a Jewish nation, or the canonical revelation given to the Jews. Every element in the commonly held view must be inserted into the passage. My view is that Jesus, who just said he and the Father were one, is quoting Psalm 82:6 in defense of his divine nature, reminding his Jewish audience that there were in fact other *ʾēlohîm* besides the God of Israel, and those *ʾēlohîm* were his sons. Because he calls himself the son of God in the next breath, this at the very least puts him in the class of the sons of the Most High of Psalm 82:6—divine *ʾēlohîm*.

If this were all that was written by John in his Gospel about the divine Sonship of Jesus, there would at best be a stalemate with Latter-day Saint scholars about the ontological nature of Jesus. He would be one of the *ʾēlōhîm*; seen one, seen them all. But we all know that is not the sum total of what John says about Jesus's Sonship. I would suggest that the statement of John 10:36 be viewed in tandem with Jesus's own declaration in John's Gospel that he was the *μονογενής* Son. It is well established, of course, that this term does not derive from *μόνος* + *γεννάω* ("only begotten"), but from *μόνος* + *γένος* ("only kind; one of a kind; unique").⁷⁵ As Fitzmyer points out:

That *unique* is the actual meaning of *μονογενής* can be seen in Heb 11:17, where it is used of Isaac, whom Abraham was ready to sacrifice, even though God had promised Abraham abundant descendants. The word here means *only* (son) *of his kind*, i.e., the only son of the promise (Gen 21:12). Abraham in fact had already begotten Ishmael through Hagar (Gen 16:3f.; 17:22–25) and later had six other sons by Keturah (Gen 25:1).⁷⁶

We are left then with a situation: How can Jesus be the unique son of God and yet there be abundant testimony to many heavenly sons of God in the Hebrew Bible? The answer is straightforward—this Son is one with the Father. He is utterly unique. Jesus is the coregent *ʾēlōhîm*, and no other *ʾēlōhîm* can say that. Putting all the Johannine discourse together and taking the quotation in context of Jesus's claim to oneness with the Father makes this a powerful witness to the fact that Jesus was of the same essence as the Father. The Jewish authorities got the message, too. One wonders why, if the Mormon view is correct—that Jesus was just claiming to be one of many species-equal *ʾēlōhîm* because of the divine image—the Jews charged him with blasphemy.

75. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. John W. Medendorp (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 2:440.

76. Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary*, 2:440, emphasis is Fitzmyer's.

Conclusion

I am under no delusion that this paper will persuade Latter-day Saints to abandon or adjust their viewpoint. I also expect that many evangelicals will balk at embracing my arguments. Ironically, both sides may take solace in mutually disagreeing with me. That would be fine. What is more important in my mind is to clearly articulate the text and to contextualize the Hebrew Bible on its own terms. I leave the Spirit to work in each heart as he sees fit.