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Ye Really *Are* Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John

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Abstract Review of "You've Seen One *Elohim*, You've Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism's Use of Psalm 82" (2006), by Michael S. Heiser.

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Review of Michael S. Heiser. "You've Seen One *Elohim,* You've Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism's Apologetic Use of Psalm 82," presented at the 58th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Washington DC on 16 November 2006, now appearing in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 221–66.

Few topics prove more intriguing to Latter-day Saints than the biblical view of the divine council. Toward the end of his ministry, the Prophet Joseph Smith devoted considerable attention to this controversial subject. For Joseph, the issue of the council of Gods was no mere piece of theological trivia. In a discussion concerning his views regarding the council, the Prophet once taught that when Latter-day Saints "begin to learn this way, we begin to learn the only true God, and what kind of a being we have got to worship."[1] Since the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith's views regarding a divine council of celestial deities have provided the focus of considerable criticism for many Bible-believing Christians. Yet biblical scholars, however unwittingly, have in recent years followed the Prophet's lead in devoting substantial consideration to the role of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

Recent textual and archaeological discoveries have convinced scholars of the fundamental position held by the heavenly council of deities within Israelite theology. "The council of God in the Hebrew

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 349–50.

Bible is no novelty," writes biblical scholar Martti Nissinen. "The occurrences are well known."[2] As prominent Near Eastern archaeologist William Dever has explained, this view has affected the scholarly perception concerning the development of Israelite monotheism:

> A generation ago, when I was a graduate student, biblical scholars were nearly unanimous in thinking that monotheism had been predominant in ancient Israelite religion from the beginning—not just as an "ideal," but as the reality. Today all that has changed. Virtually all mainstream scholars (and even a few conservatives) acknowledge that true monotheism emerged only in the period of the exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C., as the canon of the Hebrew Bible was taking shape. . . .
>
> I have suggested, along with most scholars, that the emergence of monotheism—of exclusive Yahwism—was largely a response to the tragic experience of the exile.[3]

To date, the most exhaustive study of the biblical view of the divine council by a Latter-day Saint is Daniel C. Peterson's "'Ye Are Gods': Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind."[4] Peterson provides an impressive analysis of LDS theology and Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in the Gospel of John. For Peterson, the Latter-day Saint doctrine regarding the divine nature of humanity provides a strong interpretive crux for understanding Jesus's use of the council text: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment" (Psalm 82:1 New Revised Standard Ver-

2. Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnari für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Vandenhoeck: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 2002), 4.

3. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 294–95, 297.

4. 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), 471–594. See David E. Bokovoy, "Heavenly Councils in the Old Testament and Modern Revelation," *Religious Educator* (forthcoming).

sion, NRSV). Recently, however, Peterson's essay has drawn the attention of Michael Heiser, an evangelical Bible scholar who specializes in the Israelite view concerning the divine council. In his critique of Peterson, Heiser takes exception to his analysis of Psalm 82. As a specialist in biblical council imagery, Heiser attempts to correct what he perceives as "certain flaws in the LDS understanding and use of Psalm 82" (p. 222 above). Heiser raises several important issues worthy of careful consideration. The following essay is not an exhaustive treatment of or response to the issues raised in Heiser's critique. Instead, it will provide a general response to Heiser's claims, particularly those claims that apply both to LDS thought and to Psalm 82.

An LDS View of the Divine Council

In his response to the LDS interpretation of Psalm 82, Heiser correctly notes that Latter-day Saints have a keen interest in the biblical view of the divine council. During his ministry, the Prophet Joseph Smith provided important doctrinal insights regarding the heavenly assembly. Although his ideas seemed somewhat revolutionary for many Christians in the nineteenth century, modern biblical scholars today, as Heiser himself observes, recognize that divine councils of deities fulfilled a vital role in biblical theology. During the April conference of the church in 1844, Joseph Smith testified concerning the importance of the heavenly council organized before the creation of the earth. Concerning "the beginning," Joseph declared that "the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and people it."[5]

In his journal entry for 11 June 1843, Franklin D. Richards provided an account of the Prophet's teaching that "the order and ordinances of the kingdom were instituted by the priesthood in the council of heaven before the world was."[6] Elder Richards later records Joseph's

5. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* 349.

6. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph,* ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 215, capitalization and spelling somewhat standardized in such quotations.

testimony that "all blessings that were ordained for man by the council of heaven were on conditions of obedience to the law thereof."[7] The Book of Abraham refers to "the intelligences that were organized *before the world was*" (Abraham 3:22). In this council setting, God "stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good" (Abraham 3:23). According to the Prophet, "every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the grand council of heaven."[8] Though the concept may seem odd to some Christians, these teachings are not completely absent in the Bible.

The notion of God assigning members of his council to assume important positions of administrative responsibility appears in its earliest form in Deuteronomy 32:8: "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods" (Deuteronomy 32:8 NRSV). For Latter-day Saints, who at least in part associate the council with humanity, a seemingly parallel notion appears in the council story featured in the Book of Abraham:

> And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born. (Abraham 3:23)

Peterson argues that in Abraham 3:22–23 "we have God standing in the midst of premortal spirits who are appointed to be rulers, in a scene that is really a textbook instance of the motif of the divine assembly. These are premortal human beings. Can they truly be called 'gods' in any sense? . . . Yes, they can."[9] For Peterson, many of the gods described in biblical council texts are in fact human beings.

Peterson's position is grounded in LDS theology. Following the council scene described in Abraham 3, the Book of Abraham contin-

7. *Words of Joseph Smith,* 232.
8. *Words of Joseph Smith,* 367.
9. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 541–42.

ues with a description of the Gods' involvement in creation: "And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth" (Abraham 4:1). In his teachings, Joseph Smith appears to provide an interpretive key concerning the identity of these deities:

> [An] everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth; these personages, according to Abraham's record, are called God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the witness or Testator.[10]

Other LDS commentators have suggested additional possibilities. Joseph Fielding Smith taught that

> it is true that Adam helped to form this earth. He labored with our Savior Jesus Christ. I have a strong view or conviction that there were others also who assisted them. Perhaps Noah and Enoch; and why not Joseph Smith, and those who were appointed to be rulers before the earth was formed? We know that Jesus our Savior was a Spirit when this great work was done. He did all of these mighty works before he tabernacled in the flesh.[11]

Bruce R. McConkie expressed a similar view: "Christ and Mary, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, and a host of mighty men and equally glorious women comprised that group of 'the noble and great ones,' to whom the Lord Jesus said: 'We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell' (Abraham 3:22–24)."[12] Since the expression *we will go down* is followed in the Book of Abraham with the statement "they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the

10. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* 190.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 1:74–75.

12. Bruce R. McConkie, "Eve and the Fall," in *Woman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 59, emphasis deleted.

earth" (Abraham 4:1), it appears that Elder McConkie believed that these Gods from the heavenly council included premortal humans. To some extent, therefore, the title *god* is appropriately applied to the premortal sons and daughters of Heavenly Father.

Joseph Smith's view of the divine council suggests that this assembly of deities served a vital administrative role in God's plan of happiness. A journal entry recorded by William Clayton in 1845 provides evidence for the Prophet's teachings regarding this doctrine:

> It has been a doctrine taught by this church that we were in the Grand Council amongst the Gods when the organization of this world was contemplated and that the laws of government were all made and sanctioned by all present and all the ordinances and ceremonies decreed upon.[13]

Significantly, the Book of Abraham specifically notes that God "*stood* in the midst of" these souls (Abraham 3:23). This reference to God *standing* amongst divine beings in a heavenly council setting finds important parallels with biblical tradition, including Psalm 82:1, which refers to God *standing* in the council and passing judgment.

From an analysis of the legal material in the Hebrew Bible, it appears that in a traditional judicial setting, judges *sat* while plaintiffs *stood*.[14] This important distinction provides a significant clue for interpreting Moses as judge in Exodus 18:13–14:

> And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses *sat* to judge the people: and the people *stood* by Moses from the morning unto the evening. And when Moses' father in law saw all that he did to the people, he said, What is this thing thou doest to the people? why *sittest* thou thyself alone, and all the people *stand* by thee from morning unto even?[15]

13. *Words of Joseph Smith,* 84 n. 10.

14. Hans J. Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), 85–86.

15. For additional examples of the practice of sitting for judgment, see Judges 4:5; Joel 3:12; Psalm 122:5; Proverbs 20:8; Daniel 7:9–10.

Biblical scholar Simon Parker has shown that the distinction between *sitting* and *standing* in judicial settings also operates in the biblical view of the divine council.[16] These nuances were not unique to the West Semitic world. In Mesopotamia, "anybody who happened along and had a mind to could 'stand'—that is, participate—in the *puḫrum* [i.e., assembly]."[17] As Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen explained, the Akkadian words "*uzuzzu,* 'to stand,' and *yašābu,* 'to sit,' are technical terms for participating in the *puḫrum*."[18] From a Near Eastern perspective, these observations shed considerable light on passages such as Isaiah 3:13 where Jehovah "*stands* up to plead a cause, He *rises* to champion peoples" (Jewish Study Bible, JSB).

Peterson's analysis of Psalm 82 suggests that the text reflects the council story depicted in the Book of Abraham. The fact that Psalm 82:1 specifically states that "God *stands* in the divine council" sustains Peterson's thesis. Peterson writes:

> We need not take Psalm 82's portrayal of judgment and condemnation within the divine council as literally accurate, as representing an actual historical event (although, obviously, it might), any more than we are obliged to take as literally true the depiction of Satan in Job 1–2, freely coming and going within the heavenly court and even placing wagers with God.[19]

With its traditional council imagery, Psalm 82 has intrigued biblical scholars such as Parker, who argued that the text originally described Yahweh's rise to supremacy in the assembly.[20] Parker, in part, based his assessment on the fact that Psalm 82 appears as a section of the Elohistic collection wherein the editor(s) reveal a strong propensity toward replacing divine names such as Yahweh with Elohim.

16. See, for example, 1 Kings 22:19, 21; Job 1:6; 2:1; Daniel 7:9–10; see also Simon B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God—Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *Revue Biblique* 102/4 (1995): 537.

17. Thorkild Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2/3 (1943): 164.

18. See Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy," 164 n. 24.

19. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 536.

20. Parker, "Beginning of the Reign of God," 537.

Parker argued that verses one and five in Psalm 82 served as narrative introductions to Yahweh's council address delivered before his father Elyon, the head of the council. In his analysis, Parker convincingly illustrates that Yahweh would have originally appeared in Psalm 82 as merely one of the assembled participants of deities. "Having thought that the members of the council were all gods (and therefore just—and immortal), Yahweh now recognizes that, being incorrigibly unjust, they will perish like mortals, fall like some human potentate."[21] Parker's analysis of Psalm 82 works well with Peterson's claim that the text reflects the story of the grand council from the Books of Abraham and Moses.

In an important part of his critique concerning these issues, Heiser argues against the theory endorsed by biblical scholars such as Parker and Mark S. Smith that, in its earliest stages, Israelite religion originally perceived Yahweh as a son of El. "In terms of an evaluation of the separateness of El and Yahweh," writes Heiser, "Latter-day Saint scholars have too blithely accepted the positions of Smith, Parker, and Barker. All is not nearly as tidy as they propose" (p. 234). Heiser, for example, maintains that rather than a separate divine father, the Elyon or "God Most High" presented in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 is none other than Yahweh himself. In this proposal, Heiser's view stands in direct contrast to Mark Smith, who argues that "early on, Yahweh is understood as Israel's god in distinction to El. Deuteronomy 32:8–9 casts Yahweh in the role of one of the sons of El, here called ʿelyôn. . . . This passage presents an order in which each deity received its own nation. Israel was the nation that Yahweh received."[22]

The present form of Deuteronomy seems to support Heiser's argument. Rather than a separate deity, Elyon and Yahweh might appear as a single reference to the head God of the council. In addition to the divine allotment depicted in Deuteronomy 32:8, the idea of a series of minor deities that Yahweh had assigned to govern the various nations appears in Deuteronomy 4:19–20. These verses, which discuss the

21. Parker, "Beginning of the Reign of God," 539–40.

22. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 32.

allotment of the host of heaven to the nations of the world, parallel both the vocabulary and the ideology witnessed in 32:8–9. In Deuteronomy 32:9, the author uses the same root *hlk* featured in 4:20—albeit as a noun. Deuteronomy 4:19–20 specifically identifies Yahweh as the deity who gave each council deity his allotment:

> And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case. (Deuteronomy 4:19–20 Jewish Publication Society, JPS)[23]

Based upon this evidence, Heiser's assessment of the view featured in the current form of Deuteronomy may be correct; however, Heiser ultimately fails to address important evidence recognized by many contemporary biblical scholars that suggests that Israelite theology *did* in fact evolve in a manner consistent with the basic claims of Parker and Smith.[24] For example, David Noel Freedman maintains that the combination "Yahweh Elohim" or "Lord God" found in the early chapters of Genesis probably derives from an earlier sentence name given the God of Israel, namely "Yahweh El" or "God creates."[25] In a related assessment, Mark Smith has argued:

> The original god of Israel was El. This reconstruction may be inferred from two pieces of information. First, the name

23. The Jewish Publication Society edition appears in Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

24. Of course, the fact that Deuteronomy 4 simply reflects the language of Deuteronomy 32 does not automatically mean that both texts derive from the same author. The author of Deuteronomy 4 may have simply created his passages concerning Yahweh to intentionally reflect the language and ideology in Deuteronomy 32 in order to present Yahweh as the chief council deity. This very real possibility should be considered by Heiser in further research; for an introduction to theological changes reflected throughout the book of Deuteronomy, see especially Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

25. David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79/3 (1960): 156.

> of Israel is not a Yahwistic name with the divine element of Yahweh, but an El name, with the element, *ʾēl*. This fact would suggest that El was the original chief god of the group named Israel. Second, Genesis 49:24–25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18.[26]

A detailed response to all the evidence amassed by scholars who view a theological evolution in the Hebrew Bible was beyond the scope of Heiser's essay. However, notwithstanding the probability that Heiser is correct in linking Elyon with Yahweh in Deuteronomy, this claim does not negate the likelihood that, in ancient Israel, Yahweh was originally a son of Elyon:

> In the present form of the biblical text, the term [ʿElyôn] is understood to be an epithet for Yahweh, the God of Israel. It is possible, however, as some have argued, that the epithet may conceal a reference to a separate deity, possibly an older god with whom Yahweh came to be identified.[27]

LDS scholars have good reason to accept the historical views of scholars such as Parker and Smith.

Psalm 82 as the Grand Council

Though helpful to his analysis, ultimately Peterson's claims are not dependent upon the legitimacy of a Parker/Smith historical interpretation. Peterson's argument for interpreting Psalm 82 as a reflection of the grand council story featured in modern revelation finds support in Near Eastern tradition. In the ancient Near East, stories of the divine council typically begin with a crisis in which the head God calls together the gods of the council to resolve the dilemma. During the council, a series of proposals are offered. Finally, a "savior" steps forward, offering his services to the council. This savior then receives

26. Smith, *Early History of God,* 32.

27. Eric E. Elnes and Patrick D. Miller, "Elyon," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible,* ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 560.

a commission to perform his redemptive role.[28] This common Near Eastern pattern is seen, for example, in the Mesopotamian story of divine kingship known as *Enuma Elish*.[29] In this Babylonian myth, the head god of the pantheon calls together the gods in a council to resolve a dilemma created by the goddess Tiamat. Following a series of proposals, Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, receives a commission as savior. Marduk agrees to perform the role of savior on the condition that his father, Ea, the head god of the council, grant Marduk all power and glory. The same pattern appears in the Assyrian myth of Anzu. However, in this version, the god Ninurta agrees to serve as council savior while allowing his father to retain his position within the council.

Like *Enuma Elish* and Psalm 82, many of the council stories from the ancient Near East portray stories of cosmic revolt in which judgment is rendered against divine beings. This pattern is familiar to Latter-day Saints through the council story provided in the Books of Moses and Abraham (Moses 4:1–4 and Abraham 3:22–28). Although sometimes obscured, the same pattern is reflected in council traditions featured in the Hebrew Bible. The story of council crisis, for example, appears in the Isaiah Apocalypse:

> On that day [Yahweh] will punish
> the host of heaven in heaven,
> and on earth the kings of the earth. (Isaiah 24:21 NRSV)

Similar language emerges in Isaiah 27:1:

> On that day [Yahweh]
> with his cruel and great and strong sword
> will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent. (NRSV)

28. This summary is based upon the pattern identified by Simon B. Parker, "Council," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* 391–98; for a consideration of the divine council stories within the Bible as "type scenes," see David M. Fleming, "The Divine Council as Type Scene in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989).

29. For an English translation of *Enuma Elish,* see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228–77.

For Latter-day Saints, these traditions preserved in texts such as *Enuma Elish,* the book of Isaiah, and Psalm 82 provide a type of retelling—albeit sometimes hidden—of the primordial events concerning the grand council described in modern revelation.

In the ancient Near East, members of the divine council often appear to receive a type of reprimand suggestive of the punishment given Lucifer in LDS scripture.

> Because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:3–4)

With the words, "Here am I, send me," Latter-day Saints believe Jesus Christ stepped forward in the council crisis and volunteered to save humanity from the challenges associated with mortal probation (Abraham 3:27). According to the council story depicted in the Book of Abraham, Lucifer "was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him" (Abraham 3:28). In his analysis, Peterson does well to draw attention to the fact that Isaiah's reference to "Lucifer, son of the morning" in Isaiah 14:12 "draws us again into the astronomical imagery often connected with the divine assembly."[30] In his own studies, Heiser has convincingly argued for a similar position:

> Ugaritic regularly refers to heavenly beings as *pḫr kkbm* (the "congregation of the stars"), language corresponding with כוכבי בקר ("morning stars"; in parallelism with the "sons of God" in Job 38:7) and כוכבי אל (the "stars of God"; Isa. 14:13). Aside from the context of these references, each of which clearly points to personal beings, not astronomical phenom-

30. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 533.

> ena, it is significant that in the entire ancient near eastern literary record, El is never identified with a heavenly body. Thus "the stars of El" points to created beings with divine status.[31]

For Latter-day Saints, recent archaeological and textual discoveries like those referred to by Heiser are especially intriguing. However, as Peterson argues in the quotation provided above (p. 273), Latter-day Saints do *not* need the Bible to express a precise parallel with modern revelation in order to find support for LDS theology.

The fact that texts such as Psalm 82 somewhat parallel Latter-day Saint teachings is sufficient to argue that a more exact version of the grand council story such as is witnessed in modern revelation may have existed in antiquity. However, notwithstanding his basic agreement with Peterson concerning the fundamental role assumed by the council of deities in the Hebrew Bible, Heiser ultimately departs from Peterson's analysis of Psalm 82, suggesting that the biblical view of the council contains eight fundamental points that conflict with LDS theology.

Heiser's Sixteen Points

Heiser provides a list of sixteen arguments outlining his position regarding Psalm 82 and the divine council. He divides these into eight points "with which many evangelicals would probably disagree and with which many Latter-day Saints would likely agree," followed by eight points "with which many Latter-day Saints would probably disagree and with which many evangelicals would likely agree" (pp. 222–24). Heiser's perspectives regarding Psalm 82 are clearly sound. They include such issues as the inadequacy of the term *monotheism* as a reference to Israelite theology and the biblical use of the word *elohim* as a literal reference to gods rather than human judges. While Heiser is certainly correct in suggesting that his first eight views would prove problematic for many evangelicals, but not for most Mormons, Heiser's list of eight statements on Psalm 82 that he assumes many Latter-day

31. Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," 15; for an electronic version, see thedivinecouncil.com/DT32BibSac.pdf (accessed 8 February 2007).

Saints would disagree with indicates a basic lack of exposure to Latter-day Saint thought.

Heiser is well versed in biblical studies. His work has contributed important insights toward a scholarly view of the essential role assumed by the divine council in Old Testament theology, but he is not a Latter-day Saint. However, Heiser does not consider in his critique the possibility that most Latter-day Saints, including Peterson, do not believe that the biblical view of the council mirrors precisely what Latter-day Saints accept through modern revelation. Joseph Smith's revelations proclaim our day as the dispensation of the fulness of times "according to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this world was" (D&C 121:32). For Latter-day Saints, this final dispensation represents the time decreed by God and his council in which "those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times" (D&C 128:18). Therefore, Latter-day Saint scholars acknowledge that an LDS understanding of the council does not precisely mirror the perspectives manifested in the Bible. That having been said, most Latter-day Saints certainly accept the view advocated by Peterson that the biblical perspective of the heavenly council of deities is in greater harmony with LDS belief than with any other contemporary Christian tradition. A recognition that the Bible, though not flawless, is inspired of God allows Latter-day Saints to comfortably engage the views put forth by biblical scholars such as Heiser, even when those observations prove threatening to our evangelical counterparts.

If certain biblical authors, for example, *did* in fact believe, as Heiser seems to correctly suggest, that Yahweh was "not 'birthed' into existence by the 'olden gods' described in Ugaritic texts" (p. 223), Latter-day Saints would have no problem simply accepting the observation as a biblical view. Similarly, even though Heiser assumes that many Mormons would disagree with his opinion that the Bible presents Yahweh, the God of Israel, as "ontologically unique" (p. 223), in reality many Latter-day Saints recognize that this is precisely the case.

Even within LDS theology, God the Father stands out as ontologically unique inasmuch as he created the spirits of all humanity. Modern revelation describes God with the words "from eternity to eternity He is the same, and His years never fail" (D&C 76:4).

Yahweh's Ontological Uniqueness

In addition to the evidence Heiser presents for what he calls Yahweh's ontological uniqueness, the name *Yahweh* itself appears vocalized in the Hebrew Bible as a finite *Hiphil* verb form. The vocalization of YHWH as "Yahweh" carries a specific nuance, since "Hebrew grammars traditionally represent the *Hiphil* stem as the causative of the *Qal* stem."[32] Frank Moore Cross explains that "the accumulated evidence . . . strongly supports the view that the name *Yahweh* is a causative imperfect of the Canaanite-Proto-Hebrew verb *hwy,* 'to be.'"[33] Therefore, the divine name *Yahweh,* according to this view, literally means "He who causes to be" or even "He who procreates." One of the interesting points to consider concerning the biblical title *Yahweh Sabaoth* or "Lord of Hosts" is that typically in Hebrew, proper names do not appear bound to a genitive noun—that is, "John of Hosts" or "Mary of Earth," etc.[34] Since a proper name cannot traditionally function as a bound form in a construct chain, Cross interprets the King James title "Lord of Hosts" as "'*he creates* the (divine) hosts.'"[35] If correct, this view would lend support to Heiser's argument that "Yahweh is said

32. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 433.

33. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 65.

34. "A proper noun cannot, as a rule, be followed by a genitive." Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew,* trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 2:481. Admittedly, however, textual evidence shows that the rule need not apply to divine names; see J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982): 12–13; and especially John H. Choi, "Resheph and *YHWH ṢĔBĀ'ÔT*," *Vetus Testamentum* 54 (2004): 17–28. I offer this assessment of the title Yahweh Sabaoth, which reflects the views of scholars such as David Noel Freedman and Frank Moore Cross as merely an intriguing possibility.

35. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic,* 65, emphasis added.

to be the creator of all other members of the heavenly host" (p. 250). Heiser incorrectly assumes that this apparent biblical teaching concerning Yahweh's uniqueness among the gods is not inconsistent with LDS theology.

Though Latter-day Saints view God the Father and Jesus Christ as two separate divine beings, for the Saints, the biblical titles associated with these deities are clearly interchangeable. Latter-day Saints have no problem, therefore, in associating God the Father with the title Yahweh—that is, "He who causes to be" or even "He who procreates." The 1916 official declaration presented by the First Presidency of the church states "God the Eternal Father, *whom we designate by the exalted name-title Elohim,* is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and of the spirits of the human race."[36] Clearly, however, the First Presidency's move toward *designating* God the Father as *Elohim* and Jesus the Son as *Jehovah* was primarily a move by church leaders to create uniformity in Latter-day Saint expression. In a recent *Ensign* article, Keith Meservy observed that "in at least three Old Testament passages it appears that Lord [i.e., Jehovah] applies to Heavenly Father, not Jesus Christ: Ps. 110:1; Ps. 2:7; Isa. 53:10."[37] No doubt, for many Latter-day Saints, this estimate offered by Meservy could be greatly augmented. LDS teachings, therefore, do not preclude the ontological uniqueness of God the Father that Heiser witnesses in the Hebrew Bible.

Yahweh as a Being "Species-Unique"

Certainly, Heiser is justified in suggesting that the gods of the divine council appear inferior to Israel's deity. He uses this correct observation, however, to build an argument that Israel's God was therefore somehow "species-unique" (p. 250). In his discussion concerning the biblical evidence for Yahweh being "species-unique," Heiser bases his interpretation on five points of evidence: (1) "Yahweh

36. "The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve," as cited in *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:26, emphasis added.

37. Keith H. Meservy, "LORD = Jehovah," *Ensign,* June 2002, 29 n. 3.

is said to be the creator of all other members of the heavenly host"; (2) "Yahweh was considered pre-existent to all gods"; (3) Yahweh has the power to strip the other *elohim* of their immortality; (4) Yahweh alone is referred to in the Bible as *ha-elohim*; and (5) "the other gods are commanded to worship Yahweh" (see pp. 250–57). Though each of Heiser's five points of evidence do, in fact, appear in the Bible, contrary to Heiser's suggestion none of these observations establishes Yahweh as being "species-unique." In the Bible, Yahweh is the God of gods, but the biblical gods were still biblical gods. As Paul Sanders has explained, according to the Deuteronomic vision, "the [Sons of God described in Deuteronomy 32:8] are relatively independent; they have their own dominions, like YHWH."[38]

Notwithstanding his acceptance of the importance of the divine council of deities in biblical theology, Heiser's critique suffers, in part, through his effort to define Israel's deity as a being "species-unique" (p. 250). He is correct in drawing attention to the fact that biblical authors viewed their deity as exceptionally powerful in the council. "For the Lord your God is God of gods," proclaims Deuteronomy 10:17, "and Lord of lords." Unfortunately, however, in identifying Yahweh as a being "species-unique," Heiser forces the biblical view of deities into an image somewhat consistent with radical monotheism.[39] Contrary to Heiser's suggestion, the creative act in and of itself does not set the creator apart as an exclusive species. The same point also applies to the issue Heiser raises concerning primogeniture. In other words, a man, for instance, may exist before both his children and his siblings, and though preeminence may render the person "unique" on some levels, prior existence would not, in this or in any other case, render a being as "species-unique." True, the Bible speaks of gods separate from Israel's primary deity as *elohim aḥerim*—that is, "other gods" (see Exodus 20:3; 23:13; Deuteronomy 5:7; 6:14, etc.). However as Yair Hoffman has observed, "A survey of the use of *aḥerim* ["other"] shows

38. Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 370.

39. The term *radical monotheism* refers to the theological position that only one divine being exists in the universe. The expression was popularized by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 154.

that when used attributively with regard to garments, days, messengers and objects, it clearly has a relative meaning: something different, *yet of the same kind*."[40] Therefore, "there is no reason to assume that in the phrase *elohim aḥerim* the attribute has a more distinctive meaning."[41] When all is said and done, the biblical deities, like Yahweh himself, were still gods.

In addition, contrary to Heiser's assertion, the simple fact that Elohim possesses the power to strip the other deities of their immortality in Psalm 82 does *not* indicate that these gods are of a different species than Elohim. According to the Psalmist's view, Elohim is simply more powerful than the other gods. Analogies from the ancient Near East illustrate the problematic nature of Heiser's claim. In the Babylonian story *Enuma Elish,* for instance, the primordial mother goddess, Tiamat, created the god Qingu as chief deity over Tiamat's military forces. As a result of his actions taken against the divine council, the deities of the assembly "bound [Qingu] and held him in front of Ea, [and they] imposed the penalty on him and cut off his blood."[42] The fact that, in *Enuma Elish,* the council could strip Qingu of his immortality did not mean that the god Qingu was somehow of a different or lesser divine species. In the Sumerian myth of Enlil and Ninlil, Enlil (one of the "great gods" of Mesopotamia) is brought to trial for having raped the goddess Ninlil.[43] As Enlil returned to the city of Nippur, he was arrested by the assembly while walking through the temple court. The trial commenced immediately. In the myth, the council presented the verdict that "the sex offender Enlil will leave the town."[44] Accordingly, the myth reports that Enlil left Nippur, headed toward the netherworld. In his assessment of the story, Jacobsen points out

40. Yair Hoffman, "The Conception of 'Other Gods' in Deuteronomistic Literature," in *Concepts of the Other in Near Eastern Religions,* ed. Ilai Alon, Ithamar Gruenwald, and Itamar Singer (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 107, emphasis added.

41. Hoffman, "Conception of Other Gods," 107.

42. As cited in Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia,* 261.

43. For a summary of the myth, see Gwendolyn Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 47–48; for a translation, see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once . . . : Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 167–80.

44. Jacobsen, *Harps,* 174.

that Enlil's descent to Hades may indicate that the high god in Mesopotamian mythology was originally sentenced to death.[45] As noted by James Ackerman in his dissertation concerning Psalm 82, these types of judgment scenes in which the council determines that gods will die like mortals carry important implications for interpreting the cultural background for the biblical text.[46] Contrary to Heiser's interpretation, none of these stories indicate that the dying gods were of a different species or order than the gods who issued the sentence.

Near Eastern traditions often place considerable emphasis on the dying-god motif.[47] In no sense, however, are these dying gods—even when resurrected—somehow depicted as a lesser species. Heiser's confusion concerning the implications of a biblical statement that God issued a judgment of death to the deities of the divine council illustrates the fundamental need for biblical scholars to pursue Assyriology in connection with their efforts to interpret the Hebrew Bible.

Also contrary to Heiser's suggestion, the punishment meted out to usurpers in Near Eastern council stories never indicates that the criminals derived from some sort of exceptional species. The story of Athtar from ancient Canaan, for instance, presents the tradition of Athtar's descent to the underworld following the deity's ascension to the throne of Baal. The details involved in Athtar's story contain important thematic elements depicted in ancient Near Eastern stories of cosmic revolt. Athtar seems to share some semblance with Baal's mortal enemy Mot or "Death" into whom Baal himself descends. Hence, Hugh Page notes that Athtar's "descent to the underworld . . . implies that on some level Athtar has placed himself in proximity to or relationship with the only god that Baal proves incapable

45. Thorkild Jacobsen, "An Ancient Mesopotamian Trial for Homicide," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture,* ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 207; first published in *Studia Biblica et Orientalia,* vol. 3 of Analecta Biblica et Orientalia XII (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1959), 130–50.

46. See James S. Ackerman, "An Exegetical Study of Psalm 82" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1966), 186–93.

47. For a recent survey of the issue, which includes a survey of previous assessments, see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001).

of defeating."[48] Athtar's assumption of the throne of Baal, followed by his descent to the underworld, indicates that this portion of the Baal cycle from ancient Canaan fits the general category of the cosmic revolt genre witnessed in texts such as Abraham 3 and Psalm 82:

1. Kindly El the Compassionate answers:
2. "One so small cannot race
3. with Baal cannot handle the lance
4. with Dagan's son when they test one another."
5. Lady Athirat of the Sea answers:
6. "Let us enthrone Athtar the Strong,
7. Let Athtar the Strong be king."
8. Then Athtar the Strong
9. ascended the summit of Sapan
10. He sat upon the throne of Mightiest Baal
11. His feet would not reach its footstool
12. His head would not reach its top.
13. Athtar the Strong answered:
14. "I cannot rule on the summit of Sapan."
15. Athtar the Strong descended
16. He descended from the throne of Mightiest Baal
17. And he ruled over the underworld, god of all of it.
18. drew in barrels,
19. drew in jars. (KTU 1.6:49–67, translation)

The fact that Athtar, the Strong, experienced a type of "death" in which he "ruled over the underworld" following his descent from Baal's throne does not suggest that Athtar was a "being species-unique" from the other deities, any more than Inanna or Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddesses who experienced a type of death in the underworld, were of a different species than the gods Ea, Enki, Marduk, and so forth.

48. Hugh R. Page Jr., *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of Its Reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 92; Page's views concerning the Athtar myth have been criticized by Gregorio del Olmo Lete, "In Search of the Canaanite Lucifer," *Aula Orientalis* 19 (2001): 125–32.

Still, in his efforts to present Yahweh as a being species-unique, Heiser correctly draws attention to the other gods of the council who are commanded to worship Yahweh. In his analysis, he focuses upon the call given to the gods in Psalm 29:1–2: "Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God; ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength! Ascribe to Yahweh the glory of his name; worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness!" (as quoted on p. 256). While Heiser's observations certainly illustrate that biblical authors viewed their deity as *unique*—that is, exceptional—throughout Near Eastern tradition lesser gods regularly appear in a position in which they offer praise, service, and devotion, to the higher gods of the council. Richard J. Clifford explains that in the Phoenician view of the assembly "as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the assemblies are pictured as subordinate to individual gods, although the assembly's consent seems necessary for important decisions."[49] Simply because ancient texts—including the Bible—depict the members of the assemblies as "subordinate to individual gods," this in no way implies that the higher deities somehow belonged to a separate species. Ancient Near Eastern texts such as *Mursili's Hymn* and *Prayer to the Sun-goddess of Arinna* (CTH 376.A) establish the fact that Near Eastern peoples believed that gods of the same species paid homage to higher deities in a way comparable to the biblical view:

> You, O Sun-goddess of Arinna, are honored goddess. Your name is honored among names, and your divinity is honored among gods. Furthermore, among the gods you are the most honored and the greatest. There is no other god more honored or greater than you. You are the lord . . . of just judgment. You control the kingship of heaven and earth.[50]

Holding the position "most honored" among the gods did not establish Arinna as species-unique. Arinna was simply the god before whom, from the author's perspective, the other gods would regularly

49. Richard J. Clifford, "Phoenician Religion," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 279 (1990): 57.

50. As cited in Itamar Singer, *Hittite Prayers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 51.

"fall down."[51] For the ancients, the Near Eastern view of the divine court clearly reflected or were expressed in terms of earthly reality. Therefore, just as the high king before whom other humans paid homage was still a human being, so the god to whom other deities paid homage was still a god, matching in species. For biblical authors, Yahweh stood at the head of the hierarchy in Israelite thought. Yahweh was unique as the God of gods, but he was not unique in his divinity. From a biblical perspective, Yahweh even shared this divinity with humanity.

Humans as Theomorphic Beings

In his discussion concerning the biblical view regarding theomorphic humans, Peterson draws attention to Paul's New Testament sermon presented in Acts 17:28–29:

> For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.
>
> Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Peterson, in part, argues for a biblical connection between God and humanity based on the fact that "the word rendered 'offspring' by the King James translators is the Greek *genos,* which is cognate with the Latin *genus* and means 'family' or 'race,' or 'kind,' or, even, and most especially interesting, . . . 'descendants of a common ancestor.'"[52] For Latter-day Saints, human beings are literally the offspring of God and therefore, intrinsically theomorphic. Part of the strength of Peterson's essay lies in his recognition that, like Latter-day Saints, biblical authors regularly blur the distinction between humanity and divine beings.[53] Not only does Peterson draw attention to the prophetic interaction with the council as support for his thesis, but he also places consider-

51. Singer, *Hittite Prayers,* 51.
52. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 542–43.
53. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 509.

able emphasis upon the deified dead in the Hebrew Bible and the early Christian teaching regarding deification.[54] Heiser, notwithstanding Peterson's evidence, rejects the idea that a genus equation of God and humankind appears in the Bible.

For his criticisms of Peterson's views, Heiser places considerable weight on the notion that "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" (p. 224). On some levels, Heiser's point concerning the word *tzelem,* or "image," in Genesis 1:26–27 is correct. Concerning this controversial term, Marc Z. Brettler has recently explained:

> The word *tzelem* ("image") elsewhere always refers to a physical representation. For example, the Book of Ezekiel uses *tzelem* when it refers to "men sculptured upon the walls, *figures* of Chaldeans drawn in vermilion" (23:14) or when it accuses Israel of fornicating with "phallic *images*" (16:17). The word often refers to idols (e.g., Num. 33:52; Ezek. 7:20; Amos 5:26; 2 Chron. 23:17). It always signifies a concrete entity rather than an abstract one. This is not surprising since the Bible (in contrast to most medieval philosophical traditions, both Jewish and Christian) often depicts God in corporeal terms.[55]

Genesis 1:26–27 suggests that God's physical likeness is similar to humanity's, but Heiser is correct that the statement does not indicate that biblical authors viewed humans as gods or that God himself was once a human. However, many other texts from the Bible *do* present a theomorphic view of humanity. Peterson therefore is precisely correct in stating that "the Latter-day Saint understanding that humans are of the same genus or species as God is thus clearly biblical."[56]

54. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 509–28.

55. Marc Z. Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 43–44, Hebrew word deleted.

56. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 547.

Adam as a Divine Council Member

In addition to associating humanity with the *tzelem* of God, the Bible describes the first man as a deified member of the divine council. In the Eden story the Lord took advantage of the wet, claylike soil and "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). In an important study concerning this imagery, Walter Brueggemann has shown that a biblical connection exists between being raised from the dust and enthronement.[57] "To be taken 'from the dust' means to be elevated from obscurity to royal office and to return to dust means to be deprived of that office and returned to obscurity."[58] Imagery such as that witnessed in 1 Kings 16:2 supports Brueggemann's interpretation: "Forasmuch as I [God] exalted thee [Jehu] out of the dust, and made thee prince over my people Israel . . ." (1 Kings 16:2). Hence, the notion of the God raising man "from the dust of the earth" in Genesis 2:7 in part suggests that Yahweh begins his creative activity by forming a divine king. According to Genesis 2:15, this divine king through a type of *imitatio dei* would continue to perform the work of Yahweh who "planted" the garden: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." In a similar fashion, Mesopotamian kings such as Hammurapi glorified their efforts through the use of creation and agricultural imagery:

> I encircled [the wall] with a swamp. I dug the Euphrates as far as Sippar (and) made it reach a prosperous quay.
>
> I, Hammu-rāpi, who builds up the land, . . . caused Sippar and Babylon to dwell in peaceful abodes, forever. . . . What from [primordial days] no one among the kings had done, I did in a grand fashion for the god Šamaš, my lord.[59]

57. Walter Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84/1 (1972): 1–18.

58. Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," 2.

59. Douglas Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003–1595 BC)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 348–49.

The view presented in the Babylonian inscription on the wall of Sippar reflects the common Near Eastern assumption featured in Genesis 2 of a God/king participating in the act of creation from "primordial days" through structure.[60] As a king, Hammurapi assumed the same role filled by deities who created the universe by giving order to preexistent chaos. In its depiction of Adam as the primordial gardener, the Bible relies upon similar imagery.

Man's status as the archetypal gardener/king in Genesis 2–3 contains important parallels with Mesopotamian kingship theory.[61] Several examples of Mesopotamian iconography feature a depiction of the tree (or plant) of life over which the king and priests appear pouring libations. In assessing the connection between Mesopotamian kings and gardeners, Geo Widengren cites these statements from the Tammuz text R IV 27 No. I:

> A tamarisk which in the garden has no water to drink,
> Whose foliage on the plant sends forth no twig.
> A plant which they water no more in its pot,
> Whose roots are torn away.
> A herb which is in the garden has no water to drink . . .
> Among the flowers of the garden he sleeps,
> Among the flowers of the garden he is thrown.

According to Widengren, "the Tree of Life is watered by the king, who pours out over it the Water of Life which he has in his possession. The Tree of Life constantly needs the Water of Life near which it is growing in the garden of paradise."[62] The connection between king and gardener was widely attested throughout ancient Mesopotamia.

60. In his translation, Frayne renders the Akkadian word *ṣi-a-tim* as "the past." The inscription, however, clearly relies on creation imagery, and I have therefore interpreted *ṣiatim* as "primordial days" in accordance with the information provided in Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 337.

61. See Geo Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1951).

62. Widengren, *King and the Tree of Life,* 15.

This portrayal of kingship appears in the birth legend of Sargon, wherein the monarch declares:

> Akki, the waterscooper, placed me as his gardener.
> When I was a gardener Ishtar was in love with me.
> The kingship I exercised during x + 5 years.

These lines from the tale of Sargon, the gardener whom the goddess Ishtar loved, seem to provide an especially significant parallel with the biblical view presented in the story of Eden. In the words of Nicholas Wyatt: "the man in his garden is a symbolic allusion to the king in his sanctuary."[63]

One of the important connections between humanity's enthronement in the garden and later biblical traditions includes the anointing of an Israelite king in 1 Kings 1:28–40 at the Gihon Spring; a river named Gihon was one of the four rivers that flowed out of Eden and round the land of Cush (Genesis 2:13). Significantly, the only other explicit reference to the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible appears in a context that addresses the link between kingship and divinity (see Ezekiel 28:2–13).[64]

Concerning the attestation of biblical rituals that may preserve actual religious rites wherein Israelite kings assumed divinity, Wyatt argues that

> the rituals which transform the status of the earthly king, removing him from "merely human" status to that of a sacral figure, to be couched in the form of a narrative about a god, carries with it the hint that the king himself is to be seen as transformed into a god. . . . The enthronement of the king is thus his apotheosis.[65]

63. Nicholas Wyatt, "Interpreting the Creation and Fall Story in Genesis 2–3," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93/1 (1981): 15.

64. John van Seters has argued, according to the Documentary Hypothesis, that the story of divine kingship in J derives from Babylonian influences and is therefore late postexilic. If P is in part a reaction to the J account, then it is difficult to accept van Seters's dating; see John van Seters, "The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 101/3 (1989): 333–41.

65. Nicholas Wyatt, "Degrees of Divinity: Some Mythical and Ritual Aspects of West Semitic Kingship," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31 (1999): 857.

In his exploration of biblical deification, Wyatt refers to Psalm 19:8–10 as a possible ritual text transforming the king into a divine being:

> The teaching of Yahweh is perfect,
> restoring the breast.
> The testimony of Yahweh is certain,
> making wise the head.
> The precepts of Yahweh are upright,
> rejoicing the heart.
> The commandment of Yahweh is pure,
> making bright the eyes.
> The speech of Yahweh is ritually pure,
> standing for ever.
> The judgments of Yahweh are truth,
> They are righteous all together,
> more desirable than gold,
> than much pure gold,
> more sweet than honey,
> or the refined comb.
> Your servant is indeed illumined by them,
> and in their observance is there great gain.

Concerning this possible reference to ritual anointing, Wyatt argues:

> It is true that there is no narrative statement about unction here: oil is not even mentioned. But only thus can the successive blessings on various parts of the king's body be explained. For comparison we should consider the unction of priests, in Exod. 29:4–9, 19–21, 40:12–5 and Lev. 8:10–2, 22–4, where various parts of the priest's body are anointed with oil and blood, undoubtedly with some liturgical commentary on the action, such is now narrated in these passages, providing a suitable performative utterance.[66]

If correct, Wyatt's assessment of Israelite deification proves important for an analysis of Adam as divine king in the book of Genesis.

66. Wyatt, "Degrees of Divinity," 874–75.

In Genesis chapter 2, God's initial creative act *must be* the creation of man, for, as a divine king raised "from the dust," man was specifically formed to assist deity in the creation process. God appears as a gardener who causes to grow "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (Genesis 2:9).[67] The account declares that the Lord placed the man in the garden to "dress" and "keep" his newly created oasis (Genesis 2:15). As a gardener, the Lord plants Eden; as a gardener, the Lord mixes the soil to form both man and beast. As a gardener, the Lord creates man in his image to perform the work of a God. Following his creation, man assumes the role of divine gardener.

From an ancient Near Eastern perspective, the view of Adam as divine gardener suggests that biblical authors viewed humanity as an earthly extension of the divine council. According to the Eden account, man was immortal (Genesis 2:17); man had received from deity the sacred "breath of life" (Genesis 2:7); man had been commissioned to perform the work of a god—that is, to till and tend the divine garden. Therefore, as an immortal gardener, man was already "like the gods" prior to partaking of the forbidden fruit.

In Mesopotamian myths, for example, the work of gardening was assigned to lesser members of the divine council. Hence, the story of Atrahasis opens with the following portrayal:

> When gods were man,
> They did forced labor, they bore drudgery.
> Great indeed was the drudgery of the gods,
> The forced labor was heavy, the misery too much:
> The seven(?) great Anunna-gods were burdening
> The Igigi-gods with forced labor.[68]

Like the account in Genesis, the lesser gods of the divine council in Atrahasis were gardeners who did the laborious task of caring for the canals, trees, and waterways that sustained the higher gods of the

67. For additional examples of Yahweh portrayed in the role of gardener, see Numbers 24:6; Psalm 104:16; Isaiah 44:14.

68. Altrahasis II.39 1–6, translation in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 1:159.

assembly. Hence, Adam, as an immortal being, clearly reflects the position of the Igigi in Mesopotamian thought. The questions presented to Job by Eliphaz regarding the primal human seem to share this notion:

> Are you the firstborn of the human race?
> Were you brought forth before the hills?
> Have you listened in the council of God? (Job 15:7–8 NRSV)

As Dexter Callender has observed concerning these questions, "The allusion to the primal human in Job does not give us explicit details concerning his incorporation into the sacred world. It is clear, however, that the idea is present in the reference that the primal human 'listened' in the council of God."[69] As a member of God's council, man held a stewardship to "dress" and "keep" the deity's garden (Genesis 2:15). According to the Genesis account, when the man and woman eat from the tree of knowledge, God expels the humans from Eden and assigns the cherubim, other traditional members of the divine council, to "keep" the garden (Genesis 3:24). This move may suggest that in biblical thought "keeping" the garden is a task reserved for members of the divine host. As an immortal subordinate assigned an important council task, man, however, eventually appears in the Genesis account as a being very much like the council deities mentioned in Psalm 82 who receive the decree of death:

> I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.
> But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes. (Psalm 82:6–7)

> But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:17)

69. Dexter E. Callender Jr., *Adam in Myth and History: Ancient Israelite Perspectives on the Primal Human* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 212, emphasis deleted.

Humanity and the Sons of God

Genesis chapter 2 portrays the first man as an earthly extension of the divine council, and Genesis chapter 6 presents a theomorphic view of humanity through the story of the "Sons of God." In his critique, Heiser draws attention to the fact that "it is well known among Semitists and scholars of the Hebrew Bible" that the biblical phrase *Sons of God* has "certifiable linguistic counterparts in Ugaritic texts referring to a council of gods under El and that the meaning of [this phrase] in the Hebrew Bible points to divine beings" (p. 226). As is the case with other Semitic languages, the word "son" or *ben* in Hebrew can denote a "fellow of a group, class[, or] guild."[70] Therefore, the "Sons of God" in the Old Testament refers to the lesser *gods* of the divine council. These are the beings who, according to the description provided in Job 38:7, "sang together" and "shouted for joy" when God created the world. Since their discovery in 1928, the religious texts of ancient Ugarit have made biblical scholars increasingly aware of the original meaning of the designation "Sons of God" as a title for the members of the divine council. The expression appears, for example, in reference to the deities addressed by the Canaanite god Baal in KTU 1.4 iii: 13–14:

> Valiant Baal re[plie]d;
> the Charioteer of the Clouds responded:
> "The Beloved came up and insulted me;
> he arose and spat upon me
> in the midst of the ass[emb]ly of the sons of El [*bn ilm*]."[71]

In the Bible, the first reference to these members of God's council appears in Genesis 6:

> The sons of God saw that [the daughters of humans] were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose . . . the Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also

70. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1:138.

71. For an English translation, see Nicholas Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilimilku and His Colleagues* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield, 1998), 95–96.

> afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. (Genesis 6:2–4 NRSV)

Genesis 6:2–4 illustrates that, from an Israelite perspective, the gods of the council were sexual beings, just as they were throughout the ancient Near East. In Genesis 6, Yahweh reacts to the "wickedness" of his council members with anger and destruction (vv. 5–7). Significantly for Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith creates a direct link between humanity and the council designation "sons of God" through the Prophet's addition to the story preserved in Genesis 6:

> And also, after that they had heard him, they came up before him, saying: Behold, we are the sons of God; have we not taken unto ourselves the daughters of men? And are we not eating and drinking, and marrying and giving in marriage? And our wives bear unto us children, and the same are mighty men, which are like unto men of old, men of great renown. And they hearkened not unto the words of Noah. (Moses 8:21)

While the Prophet's revision directly associates the title "sons of God" with humanity, the biblical version presents an Israelite folktale in which gods from the heavenly council participate in sexual relations with human beings. Since according to the myth, the sexual union between humanity and the members of the divine council specifically results in the production of offspring, this folktale provides strong evidence supporting the claim that Israelites traditionally believed that a direct "species" link existed between humanity and the gods. With its reference to human/divine sex and warriors of great renown, the council story featured in Genesis 6 may have influenced the development of the Samson story from the book of Judges. Like the story presented in Genesis 6, Samson's birth narrative may preserve an ancient Israelite traditional belief that humans could produce physical offspring with the gods.

In the book of Judges, the story of Samson begins with an account in which "the angel of the Lord appeared" to Samson's barren mother

(Judges 13:3–6). In his critique, Heiser draws attention to the fact that the word *angel* or *malʾāk* in the Bible is "a purely functional term and not a species term" (p. 241). Therefore, this heavenly messenger in Judges 13 is not an *angel* in the traditional way interpreted by Western readers, but rather a divine messenger sent from the heavenly realm. It is only after this "man of God" ascended to heaven in a fiery flame that Manoah recognized that he had seen a god (Judges 13:22). In his analysis of the account, Brettler states that

> when Manoah's wife speaks to her husband, she notes (v. 6), "The man of God has come to me"; . . . the idiom ["come to"] is also used in clear sexual contexts, so this may also be translated: "The man of God slept with me." Through this double entendre put in the mouth of the clever wife of Manoah, a double entendre that her dim-witted husband is too stupid to understand, the audience is told of the true father of the "boy to be born."[72]

Brettler's reading—which is also given by biblical scholars Adele Reinhartz and Susan Ackerman—is sustained by comparing Judges 13 to other biblical stories concerning barren women.[73] For example, in 1 Samuel, Hannah conceives after offering her prayer, albeit specifically following the statement, Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her (1 Samuel 1:19 JPS). Accordingly, Brettler argues that "the parentage of the child [Samson] explains his superhuman abilities."[74] With his incredible strength, Samson is very much like "the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown" depicted in Genesis 6:4 NRSV. If this reading of the Samson story is correct, Judges 13 provides further evidence supporting the Israelite view of an intimate link between humanity and the members of the heavenly assembly.

72. Marc Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (London: Routledge, 2002), 45.

73. See Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (September 1992): 25–37 ; repr. in *A Feminist Companion to Judges,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 157–70; and Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

74. Brettler, *Book of Judges,* 46.

Capable of producing offspring with members of the divine council, humanity was—as the Psalmist proclaims—only a little less than the gods (Psalm 8:5).

Prophets as Divine Council Members

Among the issues that sustain Peterson's claim that Old Testament authors viewed humans as theomorphic are biblical references to prophetic interaction with the council. Due to the administrative role assumed by the council, the Old Testament frequently depicts biblical prophets interacting with the council and receiving commissions from God to function as his representatives.[75] Peterson does well, therefore, to draw attention to this phenomenon in his analysis, since the fact that prophets functioned as part of the council strongly supports Peterson's claim that "a blurring of the distinction between mortal human beings and angels, [and] between mortal human beings and gods" appears in biblical and other ancient references to the council.[76] The book of Amos declares that "God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [*sôd*] unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Though translated as "secret" in the King James Version of the Bible, the noun *sôd,* in this instance, refers to God's divine council.[77] "Generally speaking, the word *sôd,* translated both 'council' and 'counsel,' is used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to a group or to that which transpires within a given group. When used to signify a group, it is used with reference both to humankind (e.g., Ezek 13:9) and to the divine realm (e.g., Ps 89:8)."[78] Jeremiah referred to a true prophet as one who had participated in God's *sôd* through the acts of seeing and hearing (Jeremiah 23:18). By participating in the council,

75. See, for example, Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83/3 (1964): 279–86; Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in *Kein Land für sich allein,* 4–19.

76. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 509.

77. For an introduction to this Old Testament tradition in relationship to the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, "The Calling of a Prophet," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation,* ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 35–54.

78. Callender, *Adam in Myth and History,* 144.

prophets become *malʾākim* or "angels." Literally a *malʾāk* was one who was sent—that is, a messenger. In many Old Testament passages, divine messengers appear indistinguishable from human beings (see especially Genesis 19:1–22; 32:24–31; Judges 13:3–23). The use of the term *malʾāk* for both human and divine messengers "results in some passages where it is unclear which of the two is intended if no further details are provided."[79] Therefore, in becoming members of God's council who *see* and *hear* as they *stand* in the assembly, Old Testament prophets were sent as messengers and mediators for the council (see Jeremiah 23:18).[80] This biblical tradition features important Near Eastern counterparts: "It is typical for gods in the ancient Near East," notes Samuel A. Meier, "to have at their disposal specific, lower-ranking deities who do their bidding in running errands and relaying messages."[81] In the Bible, prophets serve as these "lower-ranking deities." This point is not lost in Peterson's analysis. "Hebrew tradition," he writes, "could make human beings serving in the role of prophets the equivalent, at least temporarily, of Canaanite gods."[82] As Peterson notes, an important description of this commission occurs in Isaiah chapter 6.

In his story of prophetic commission, Isaiah described the members of God's council as *seraphim* who praised the "Lord of hosts" seated upon the heavenly throne (Isaiah 6:1–3). Through a purificatory ritual, Isaiah became a member of this heavenly council and therefore responded to God's question, "whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" with the statement, "here am I; send me" (v. 8).[83] In the ancient Near East, mouth-cleansing rituals like the one featured in Isaiah's story held considerable significance. In Mesopotamian ritual prayers, for example, mouth purification symbolized total and complete purity. Biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld drew attention to the

79. Samuel A. Meier, "Angel I," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* 87.

80. See David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage, 2003), 30–35.

81. Samuel A. Meier, "Angel of Yahweh," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* 96.

82. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 505.

83. See Victor Hurowitz, "Isaiah's Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989): 54.

analogy between Isaiah's experience and the *mis-pi* ritual performed in "An Old Babylonian Prayer of the Divination Priest" first published in 1968 by A. Goetze: "O Šamaš, I am placing in my mouth pure cedar (resin). . . . I wiped (*akpur*) my mouth with . . . cedar (resin). . . . Being (now) clean, to the assembly of the gods I shall draw near."[84]

Concerning this relationship between Isaiah 6 and this Babylonian text, Weinfeld explained: "Like Isaiah, whose mouth has to be purged in order that he may participate in the divine council, the Babylonian prophet also declares that having cleansed his mouth he is ready to draw near to the divine assembly."[85] Through the mouth-cleansing ritual, Isaiah had become a divine member of the heavenly council. Studies have shown that in its presentation of the theomorphic prophet, the entire chapter draws upon ideas traditionally associated with Mesopotamian idolatry and deification.[86] As Victor Hurowitz has noted:

> A large portion of the [Mesopotamian] sources . . . raise[s] the possibility that the washing of the mouth . . . has independent significance as a characteristic granting or symbolizing special divine or quasi-divine status to the person or object so designated. The pure mouth enables the person or object to stand before the gods or to enter the divine realm, or symbolizes a divine status.[87]

The pattern witnessed in Isaiah 6 reflects the general trend for council stories in the ancient Near East witnessed in texts like *Enuma Elish* and Abraham 3.[88] For Latter-day Saints, Isaiah's story, therefore, provides an impressive type of Jesus Christ, who volunteered in the premortal council to serve as the Savior of the world with the declaration

84. Moshe Weinfeld, "Ancient Near Eastern Patterns in Prophetic Literature," *Vetus Testamentum* 27/2 (1977): 180–81.

85. Weinfeld, "Ancient Near Eastern Patterns," 180–81.

86. See, for example, Gregory Y. Glazov, *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 111–63.

87. Hurowitz, "Isaiah's Impure Lips," 54.

88. See David E. Bokovoy, "The Calling of Isaiah," in *Covenants, Prophecies, and Hymns of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 128–39.

"here am I, send me" (Abraham 3:27). With his divine status, Isaiah could respond to the question God directed toward his council, "who will go for us," with the response "here am I, send me."

The story of prophetic commission presented in Isaiah 6 illustrates the biblical view that the council was—at least in part—comprised of divine human beings. "The members of this *sôḏ* [council] around Yahweh," explains Heinz-Josef Fabry, "are kept clearly on the terminological periphery, and finally their designation as *qedoshim* ["holy beings"] even opens up the possibility that human beings belong to this *sôḏ* (cf. Job 15:8; Ps. 89:8[7], though this involves primarily the prophets (1 K. 22:19–22; Isa. 6; 40:1–8; Jer. 23:18,22; Am. 3:7)."[89] In reality, Psalm 25 professes that any righteous being could receive this distinction: "The secret [*sôḏ*] of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant" (Psalm 25:14).[90]

For Latter-day Saints, the Old Testament perspective that prophets became members of the divine council also appears in modern revelation. Doctrine and Covenants 107:19, for example, reflects this Old Testament notion of becoming a member of God's heavenly council. This revelation refers to the blessings given to those who enter into the highest priesthood order as the "privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven . . . [having] the heavens opened unto them, to commune with the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." According to modern

89. Heinz-Josef Fabry, "*sôḏ*," in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 10:174, Hebrew transliteration simplified.

90. Given the propensity within biblical tradition to view prophets as members of the divine council, Latter-day Saints may wish to interpret the story of Lehi's encounter with the heavenly host as a prophetic call narrative in which the Book of Mormon prophet *becomes* a member of the heavenly host. Following his interaction with the council mediator who in proper council protocol "stood before" him, Lehi could perform the very same act identified with the "numberless concourses of angels" (1 Nephi 1:8). Based upon an analogy with Old Testament traditions, in verse 14, Lehi had *become* one of these angels or messengers praising God (see 1 Nephi 1:14). In what may represent a deliberate attempt to highlight the analogy, Nephi returns in his narrative to the same verb that first described the action of the council: "and after this manner was the language of my father in the *praising* of his God" (1 Nephi 1:15).

revelation, the Saints of God have an opportunity to become permanent participatory members of the heavenly assembly. The connection is made clear through the discussion in Doctrine and Covenants 76 concerning those who inherit a terrestrial glory: "Last of all, these all are they who will not be gathered with the saints, to be caught up unto the church of the Firstborn, and received into the cloud" (D&C 76:102). From these statements, it appears that two levels of council membership exist—an initial level in which premortal beings referred to as "Gods" participate in the assembly, and a second, higher, level in which mortals such as Isaiah prove themselves worthy for both an exalted status and permanent membership.

From a biblical perspective, the word *saint* that appears in Doctrine and Covenants 76:102 describing those who receive a celestial glory carries a connotation that reflects the Israelite view that (divine) humans comprise members of the divine council: As Simon Parker explains:

> "Saints" or "holy ones" translates the Hebrew *qedoshim:* the masculine plural of the adjective *qadosh* "holy." . . . *Qedoshim* [Saints or holy ones] refers to the gods as a collectivity that is widely attested throughout the ancient Near East under other names (Sons of the gods, council, etc.).[91]

In the Old Testament, "saints" is a title given to the deities of the divine council: "Who among the gods is like the Lord," declares the Psalmist, "a God feared in the council [*sôḏ*] of the saints [*qedoshim*], great and awesome above all that are around him" (Psalm 89:6–7; Hebrew, vv. 7–8).[92] The same mutability between the human and divine world appears in Jewish literature from the time of Christ. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, contain several references to the use of *qedoshim* for heavenly beings. "There is, then, a fluid boundary between the heavenly holy ones and the earthly community, at least in some of the Scrolls."[93]

91. Simon B. Parker, "Saints," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* 1355–56, Hebrew transliteration simplified.

92. Author's translation from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.*

93. John J. Collins, "Saints of the Most High," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* 1360.

Jesus's Use of Psalm 82

As Peterson suggests, these observations prove essential for an analysis of Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in John 10. As heirs to the traditions of biblical Israel, Jewish factions at the time of Christ featured a strong religious propensity toward blurring the demarcation between human and divine. In his study, Peterson effectively illustrates this fact through his analysis of deification in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. This religious continuity between biblical Israel and Judeo-Christian sects provides the basis for Peterson's thesis concerning Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in John 10: "The Latter-day Saint claim that God and humankind are akin seems a promising basis upon which to resolve the apparent disagreement between the reference of Psalm 82:6 to heavenly gods and the reference of John 10:34 to mortal human beings."[94]

Given the fact that the Hebrew Bible clearly presents humans as divine beings who can—as attested through the examples of Adam, the deified dead, and biblical prophets—function as official members of God's council, Peterson's argument carries considerable weight. If Latter-day Saint theology is correct in its assertion that some members of the council were punished for their rebellion prior to the creation of the world, then Jesus may very well have interpreted Psalm 82 as a reflection of this event. In reality, Peterson's interpretation receives very little challenge from Heiser's critique. "By the time of Jesus's ministry," writes Heiser, "Jewish writers committed to monotheism, even upon pain of death, could accept that there was a council of [elohim] 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'" (p. 260). Accordingly, Heiser argues that "the [elohim] of Psalm 82 were not human and that Jesus was in fact asserting his *own* unique ontological oneness with the Father" (p. 263). In his assessment, Heiser maintains that Jesus's statement "to whom the word of God came" refers to the *elohim* or *gods* of the divine council who as a result of their rebellion would die like mortals. Heiser's critique, therefore, assumes that in citing Psalm 82, Jesus "reminds his enemies that their scriptures say

94. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 553.

there are other [elohim] who are divine sons" (p. 264). This claim, however, does little to refute Peterson's basic argument: "it does not seem that Jesus' citation of a metaphorical use of the term *god,* as applied to human beings, would go very far toward justifying his ascription to himself of literal divinity."[95] For both Peterson and Heiser, Jesus's response relies upon a literal rendering of *elohim* as gods. The difference between the two studies lies in Heiser's confusion concerning Yahweh as a being species-unique and humanity functioning as divine members of the assembly.

Deification at the Time of Christ

Heiser's interpretations of Jesus's use of Psalm 82 may on some levels be correct. Nonetheless, his reading would not negate the fact that the Bible presents human beings as members of God's council. Heiser goes to considerable lengths to illustrate that, in contrast to Peterson's observation that Jesus's enemies literally accuse Jesus of making himself "a god,"[96] the Greek phrase in John 10 can serve as an accusation that Jesus was making himself out *to be* God. However, given the possible validity of Heiser's own argument that Jesus intended his response to remind his accusers that their sacred texts state that other gods exist, it seems that Peterson's suggestion—by Heiser's own premise—is, in fact, a stronger interpretation. In accepting Heiser's basic argument, it appears that in addition to reminding his enemies that Psalm 82 refers to other *elohim* who are divine sons, Jesus in all likelihood drew upon the well-established tradition that humans are gods in formulating his calculated response.

Influenced by the strong biblical precedence for interpreting humanity as intrinsically theomorphic, the Jewish community at Qumran held the theological stance that the members of their religious society functioned as participants of the divine council. "The members of the [Qumran] community were *ipso facto* companions to the hosts of heaven," writes John J. Collins, "and so living an angelic life, even

95. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 480.
96. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 472–73.

on earth."[97] In what appears to many scholars as a statement expressed by an exalted human being, a fragment from the *War Scroll* (4Q491 11) declares: "I am counted among the gods and my dwelling is in the holy congregation."[98] With statements such as these circulating throughout first-century Judaism, no wonder Jesus could invoke the words "Ye are gods" in defense of his own divinity. In reality, expressions concerning the biblical and early Jewish belief regarding the connection between humanity and the council (many of which are explored in greater detail in Peterson's essay) provide an important backdrop for understanding Jesus's use of Psalm 82. Given the persistence of the biblical view regarding theomorphic humans witnessed in a variety of texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, readers should take seriously the proposal that Jesus defended his own divinity by drawing attention to the divinity of others: "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (John 10:34). For a Jewish audience familiar with the expressions articulated in the writings from Qumran, Psalm 82 was a text that could be specifically linked with ideas concerning the exaltation of humanity. In the text 11Q Melchizedek, Melchizedek appears as the deity who passes judgment against the gods in Psalm 82:

> And the day [of atonem]ent is the end of the tenth jubilee in which atonement will be made for all the sons of [God] and for the men of the lot of Melchizedek. [And on the heights] he will decla[re in their] favour according to their lots; for it is the time of the «year of grace» for Melchizedek, to exa[lt in the tri]al the holy ones of God through the rule of judgment, as is written about him in the songs of David, who said: *Ps*

97. John J. Collins, "Powers in Heaven: God, Gods, and Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls,* ed. John J. Collins and Robert A. Kugler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 23–24.

98. As translated in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English,* trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 118; for an analysis of the issue, see Morton Smith, "Ascent to the Heavens and Deification in 4QM^{a}," in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The New York University Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin,* ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 181–99.

> *82:1* «Elohim will stand up in the assem[bly of God,] in the midst of the gods he judges».[99]

Since the text refers to "the sons of God" and the "men of the lot of Melchizedek," interpreters should take seriously the possibility that this Dead Sea Scroll passage refers to an exalted human Melchizedek—after the order of 4Q491 11—responsible for the judgment invoked in Psalm 82. At minimum, 11Q Melchizedek provides strong evidence for an early Jewish trend toward linking Psalm 82 with human beings. Even John Collins (who contrary to this proposal suggests that there is no indication that the Melchizedek of the *Melchizedek Scroll* was ever a mortal man) states:

> In the view of the midrash, the Most High God is El. *Elohim* is a lesser deity, an angel, if you prefer. But the striking thing about this passage is that the term *Elohim,* which is usually understood to refer to the Most High in the biblical psalm, now refers to a lesser heavenly being. There are at least two divine powers in heaven, even if one of them is clearly subordinate to the other.[100]

A survey of a Jewish midrashic use of Psalm 82 demonstrates that the connection between humanity and Psalm 82 more than likely attested in 11Q Melchizedek, is, in fact, well established in early Jewish texts. This midrashic approach to Psalm 82, which links Israel with the gods of the council, carries important implications for understanding John 10.

Scholars have observed that Jewish traditions regarding the children of Israel at Mount Sinai provide a clear conceptual background for interpreting Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in John's Gospel:

> If it were possible to do away with the Angel of Death I would. But the decree has long ago been decreed. R. Jose says: It was upon this condition that the Israelites stood up before mount

99. As translated in García Martínez, *Dead Sea Scrolls Translated,* 140, brackets in original.

100. Collins, "Powers in Heaven: God, Gods, and Angels," 19.

> Sinai, on the condition that the Angel of Death should have no power over them. For it is said: "I said: Ye are godlike beings," etc. (Ps. 82:6). But you corrupted your conduct. "Surely ye shall die like men" [Ps. 82:7].[101]

This use of Psalm 82:6–7 in the second-century midrash illustrates one of the ways Jewish theologians reinterpreted this biblical text. When at Mount Sinai Israel "stood before the Lord," the Israelites became the *elohim* or "gods" mentioned in Psalm 82. The identification of Israel as gods appears in a variety of early Jewish texts:

> You stood at Mount Sinai and said, *All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and obey* (Exod. 24:7), (whereupon) "I said: Ye are godlike beings" (Ps. 82:6); but when you said to the (golden) calf, *This is thy god, O Israel* (Exod. 32:4), I said to you, "Nevertheless, ye shall die like men (Ps. 82:7).[102]

As Jerome H. Neyrey has observed concerning this tradition:

> The basic lines of the midrashic understanding of Ps 82:6–7, then, are clear. When Israel at Sinai received God's Torah and obeyed, this led to genuine holiness, which resulted in deathlessness; hence, Israel could be called *god* because *deathless*. But when disobedient and sinful, Israel deserved the wages of sin, that is, death; hence, Israel could be called *man*.[103]

According to Neyrey, Jesus's reference to *gods* as those *to whom the word of God came* presupposes the use of Psalm 82 as a reference to Israel at Sinai in Jewish midrash. This interpretation, well justified in Jewish tradition, directly associates the elohim of Psalm 82 with humanity.

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101. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,* Tractate Baḥodesh 9, trans. Jacob Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:271–72.

102. *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Piska, 320, trans. Reuven Hammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 329.

103. Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., "'I Said: You Are Gods': Psalm 82:6 and John 10," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/4 (1989): 656.

In his critique, Heiser effectively illustrates that, in their original context, the *elohim* referred to in Psalm 82 were not human judges. However, he overstates the evidence when he argues that "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" (p. 231). With its push toward radical monotheism, Second Temple Judaism was clearly struggling with the references to multiple deities in texts such as Psalm 82. Heiser's claim fails to address the changes that even he acknowledges to have occurred in texts such as Deuteronomy 32 where, "almost certainly, the unintelligible reading of the [Masoretic Text] represents a 'correction' of the original text (whereby God presides over other gods) to make it conform to the later standard of pure monotheism: There are no other gods!"[104] This religious conundrum is also apparent in the later Aramaic revisions of divine council passages including Psalm 82.

In contrast to the biblical version of Psalm 82, which, as Heiser shows, refers to God standing in the midst of literal deities, the Targum for Psalm 82 reads:

> 1. A psalm by Asaph. As for God, his Shekinah dwells in the assembly of the righteous who are mighty in the Law; he judges among the judges of truth.
> 2. How long, O you wicked, will you judge falsely, and show partiality to the wicked? For ever.
> 3. Judge the poor and the orphan; vindicate the afflicted and the poor.
> 4. Rescue the poor and weak; deliver them from the hands of the wicked.
> 5. They do not know how to do good, nor do they understand the Law; they walk about in darkness; therefore the feet of the bases of the earth are shaken.
> 6. I said, "You are reckoned as like the angels, and like the angels of the height, all of you;

104. Bernard M. Levinson, "Deuteronomy," in *The Jewish Study Bible,* ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 441.

> 7. but you shall surely die like the sons of men, and fall like one of the princes."
> 8. Arise, O Lord, judge all the inhabitants of the earth, for you shall take possession of all the nations.[105]

This Aramaic revision of Psalm 82 stripped the Hebrew psalm of its original henotheistic ideology.[106] Instead of presenting God as holding council with the other deities of the universe, the Targum substitutes the Aramaic word *dayyanin* ("judges") for the Hebrew word *elohim* ("gods"). Based upon the judicial setting for Psalm 82, the authors of the Targum presumably felt comfortable with this textual switch because of their misreading of the Covenant Collection in Exodus which, as Heiser's critique illustrates, uses the Hebrew word *elohim* in a judicial context (Exodus 21:6). As Peterson notes, however, "Exodus 21:6 and 22:8–9 provide very weak support (if indeed, they provide any support at all) for the notion that *ʾelohim* can ever denote merely human judges."[107] Subsequent studies concerning these biblical passages have only sustained Peterson's position. David P. Wright has recently shown that, like the rest of the Covenant Collection, Exodus 21:6 ultimately derives from the Babylonian Laws of Hammurabi.[108] Therefore, the expression *ʾel ha-elohim* in Exodus 21:6 and 22:7 directly reflects the Akkadian phrase *mahar ilim* (§23, §120, §266). This connection strongly suggests that the laws in the Covenant Collection that feature the phrase *ʾel ha-elohim* use the term *elohim* as a reflection of the Akkadian word *ilim,* both of which literally mean "God." In their interpretation of these passages, however, the Aramaic revisers specifically switched the Hebrew word *elohim* for the Aramaic term *dayyanim:*

105. David M. Stec, trans., *The Targum of Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 160, emphasis removed.

106. The term *henotheism* refers to a philosophy that professes worship of a single deity while acknowledging the existence of other gods; for a consideration of ancient "monotheism," see Paula Fredriksen, "Gods and the One God: In Antiquity, All Monotheists Were Polytheists," *Bible Review* 19/1 (2003): 12, 49.

107. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods,'" 479, Hebrew transliteration simplified.

108. See David P. Wright, "The Laws of Hammurabi as a Source for the Covenant Collection (Exodus 20:23–23:19)," *Maarav* 10 (2003): 11–87.

> his master will bring him to *the judges,* and he will bring him to the door or to the doorposts; and his master will pierce his ear with an awl, and he will be a slave to him, *enslaved* forever. (Targum Neofiti on Exodus 21:6)[109]

This later Jewish interpretation of the Covenant Collection allowed readers of Psalm 82 to interpret the biblical text, which presents God's judgment over the deities of the council, as a passage in which God renders judgment against human beings. The same theological move to purely "humanize" the divine council appears in Neofiti's revision of Genesis 6:2, which changes the Hebrew title "sons of God" into the Aramaic expression "sons of the judges":

> And the sons of the *judges* saw that the daughters *of the sons of man* were beautiful *in appearance* and they took wives for themselves from among whomsoever they chose. (Genesis 6:2)[110]

These Aramaic texts therefore provide important evidence for the historical transition toward radical monotheism in later Judaism. The henotheistic ideology endorsed by Israelite authors eventually proved unacceptable to later religious interpreters who viewed the Bible as an authoritative religious collection. As illustrated in the Targumim, later Jewish interpreters often found creative ways to rework henotheistic texts into agreement with their radical monotheistic stance. No doubt, the precedent for viewing humanity as an earthly extension of the divine council in Israelite tradition facilitated these efforts. Elohim could easily be reinterpreted to represent human beings in such a climate. Ultimately, however, these changes had a long-lasting effect upon the way biblical references to the divine council would subsequently be interpreted.

Second Temple Judaism was clearly struggling to reconcile its move toward monotheism with its henotheistic past. Hence, the anger

109. The same switch however, appears in Pseudo-Jonathan, Onkelos, and Neofiti Exodus 22:7, 8, 27. For an English translation of Neofiti, see Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 91.

110. For an English translation of the Targum, see McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1,* 71.

expressed by Jesus's enemies regarding his claim for divinity in John 10 may have in part been influenced by this religious paradox. In contrast to certain Jewish sects in the first century, the Samaritans, for example, appear to have held fast to a view concerning the prophet Moses's deification:

> Moses is for the Samaritans the *Taheb,* "Restorer," the expected Messiah-like eschatological figure who will bring about a golden age and will pray for the guilty and save them. It is among the Samaritans alone that the title "man of God" receives prominence as applied to Moses; and indeed, the Samaritan depiction of Moses is highly reminiscent of the New Testament's description of Jesus as the first begotten being, materialized from his pre-existent bodiless state. Moses is a second God, God's vice-regent upon earth (*Memar Marqah* 1.2), whose very name includes the title *ʾElohim,* "God" (*Memar Marqah* 1.2).[111]

Not all Palestinian religious sects in the first century were as comfortable with deification as the Samaritans and the community at Qumran. The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, appears to have intentionally tried to disassociate Moses from this tradition:

> In the very passages (3.317, 320) where Josephus refers to Moses as inspiring and ranking higher than his own nature, he is careful to refer to him as a man. Moreover, he is careful to omit God's statements that Moses was to be to Aaron as God (Exod 4:16), and that God was making him as God to Pharaoh (Exod 7:1). He is careful to dispel the view held by some (3.95–96) that when Moses tarried on Mount Sinai for forty days, it was because he had been taken back to divinity. If he refers to Moses as a "man of God" (3.180), it is not to assert Moses' divinity but rather to refute those enemies of the Jews who had charged them with slighting the divinity whom they themselves professed to venerate (3.179).[112]

111. Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82/3–4 (1992): 326 n. 91.

112. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Moses," 323–24, Greek translations omitted.

In this intense religious climate, Jesus's defense of his own divinity using a divine council text, which, as illustrated, could in some circles be linked with human beings, met with obvious controversy.

Conclusion

The biblical view of the divine council of deities has assumed a fundamental role in biblical scholarship. Textual and archaeological discoveries made in recent years carry important implications for the way Bible-believing Christians understand their own theology in relation to Israelite beliefs. As Latter-day Saints, we owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Heiser for his important contributions in furthering this important discussion. Even in his critique of the LDS use of Psalm 82 and John 10, Heiser raises important issues worthy of careful consideration. Ultimately, no matter which opinions regarding these texts hold sway, clearly the Latter-day Saint position regarding humanity and the divine council of deities is much more biblical-like than many have supposed.