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Abstract Heiser responds to Bokovoy's critique of his argument against the traditional interpretation of Elohim as developed from Psalm 82.

ISRAEL'S DIVINE COUNCIL, MORMONISM, AND EVANGELICALISM: CLARIFYING THE ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Michael S. Heiser

I wish to thank Daniel C. Peterson, editor of the *FARMS Review*, both for his gracious offer to publish my critique of Mormonism's use of Psalm 82 and for the opportunity to briefly reply to David E. Bokovoy's response to my essay. I found Bokovoy's response to my work stimulating and helpful, and I hope to share some of the insights that occurred to me as I read his essay. I will also offer a few comments of clarification. I will follow the order of his section headings so readers who have read both essays can easily follow the discussion. Page number references are to Bokovoy's paper, immediately preceding this one.

"An LDS View of the Council" (pp. 269–76)

In his discussion of the LDS understanding of Psalm 82, Bokovoy highlights the language of Psalm 82, noting that "from an analysis of the legal material in the Hebrew Bible, it appears that in a traditional judicial setting, judges *sat* while plaintiffs *stood*" (p. 272). This "standing" language is deemed significant, for it is part of the argument to distinguish Yahweh from his father-God, Elyon, who is head of the council. He then quotes the work of the late Simon B. Parker on this issue, as well as Isaiah 3:13, which has Yahweh *standing* to plead a cause.

This view is common among scholars of Israelite religion, but in my judgment it fails in a number of regards. In my essay, which was originally a paper read in a thirty-minute time slot at a conference,

I said little about this issue. It receives a good deal of attention in my dissertation. I summarized that material in another article published in October 2006.¹ Readers can reference that article at no cost, so I will not reproduce the analysis and arguments here. A couple of observations are noteworthy. First, Psalm 82:1 does not say Yahweh is standing. Rather, it says *Elohim* is standing. Scholars theorize that the text once said Yahweh (this is in the so-called Elohist psalter), which may be the case. However, there is no textual evidence for that conclusion. The idea rests solely on a hypothetical postulate. Second, Bokovoy never addressed an important issue in his discussion of the Psalm 82 scene: If Yahweh is standing as the plaintiff and not the judge (who is presumed to be Elyon in his view), then why is it that we do not see Elyon judging in Psalm 82:8? Instead of Elyon pronouncing judgment, the psalmist asks for *Elohim* to arise and judge—the same word used in 82:1 of the God who is standing. If we allow Bokovoy's apparent thesis—that of the name Yahweh being changed to *Elohim* in 82:1 due to some motive of the Elohist, then we need to have *Elohim* in Psalm 82:8 replacing Yahweh as well. This would mean that Yahweh is both the plaintiff who stands and the judge who judges—which defeats the notion of a separation of Yahweh and Elyon in this passage. Again, this is not the only problem with this common understanding, but these points are sufficient here.

Later in this section, Bokovoy makes the point that I did not address the issue of the separation and combination of the names *Yahweh* and *Elohim* that occurs in the early chapters of Genesis. He is correct. This issue was well outside the scope and purpose of my essay, so I never introduced it into the discussion (as Bokovoy acknowledges). Bokovoy quotes David Noel Freedman, who opines that Israel's initial God was El and that Yahweh is not an El name (it has no "el" element in the name). This is taken as proof that El and Yahweh were separate in Israelite religion.

1. Michael S. Heiser, "Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8–9 and Psalm 82?" *HIPHIL* 3 (2006); online journal, posted 3 October 2006; pdf available at www.se-j.net/Default.aspx?tabid=77 (accessed 9 April 2007).

This issue is a complex one and, I think, a bit of a red herring on the part of critical scholarship. If we take the Pentateuch at face value, we have a slave people in Egypt who, at best, are somewhat faithful in orally transmitting the stories of the appearance of El (the God of their fathers) to their patriarchal ancestors. Moses comes along and receives the revelation at Sinai that this same God's name is Yahweh. Yahweh, as Bokovoy points out, may mean "He who procreates" or "He who causes to be" (p. 281).² Moses then informs the people that the two deities are one and the same and writes as much in the Pentateuch. Israel can be called after El's name (cf. the El element in "Israel") since that is perfectly appropriate. They were named after their God's self-revelation by that name. What else would we or they expect? El subsequently reveals himself as Yahweh when the people are delivered from Egypt, and their god does not change their name again—instead he changes *his own name* (or reveals another name) to signify the act of his creation of a nation from a motley group of slaves.

My point is that there is no reason to conclude *from the text* that we are dealing here with two separate deities. That idea has arisen in tandem with critical views of Pentateuchal authorship and more knowledge of Israelite religion in its wider milieu. If one accepts any form of Mosaic authorship, it can easily be argued that Moses wrote certain statements about El and Yahweh being the same deity, and later scribes further inserted that idea into Pentateuchal material that he did not write. Of course uneducated (slave) Israelites could have been confused or even believed outright that El and Yahweh were distinct. That is not the question, though. Our goal is not (or should not be) to psychologize the biblical writer or the Israelites in general. We can only know the *what* (the text as it is), not the *why* (the reason for its final form). Certain scholars attempt to do the latter all the time, but all such attempts are only guesses, not an assessment of the text.

2. Like Bokovoy, I favor this view of the divine name's meaning. However, Bokovoy should perhaps exercise more caution in advancing it in print, for few scholars accept it on the grounds that no comparable hiphil of the verb *hyh/hwh* has been found in extra-biblical material. Scholars are therefore predisposed to conclude the idea is wrong since they lack comparative evidence. I am not of the opinion that we need a Semitic parallel for an idea to be coherent, but other scholars will reject this thesis out of hand.

Too much of scholarship, in my judgment, focuses on trying to identify the *why* when this is impossible. We can certainly entertain the why and enjoy the process, but to make conclusions that guide our understanding of the text and the people who produced it is not a sound exegetical method. The fact of redaction in this regard does not prove that we have two separate deities. Even if one rejects all notions of Mosaic authorship, it can cogently be argued that the literary artists who created the Pentateuch did so to tell the above story. To insist that their story must reflect a distinction in gods is to psychologize the authors. We know the *what*—we have the text and can see what was done to convey the El=Yahweh idea (they are merged in the earliest biblical material, like Deuteronomy 32). To go beyond that is to try to exegete their psyche, which cannot be done.

One final note in this regard. We would have far less affinity for separating El and Yahweh if we did not approach the text with a preconceived notion that Israelite religion evolved from polytheism to monotheism. This modern misguided hermeneutic was the focus of much of my dissertation work. Since I do not accept the idea and the contrived definitions and data used to support it, I feel no tension in dismissing its elements. I can only wonder (out loud) what we would think of El and Yahweh were we not to proceed from this starting point. Younger scholars in most cases do not, since the academy has sold its soul to the idea and thereby filters all evidence through the grid that it has itself erected over the text.

“Yahweh as a Being Species-Unique” (pp. 282–88)

Bokovoy takes issue with my argument that the ability to strip other gods of their immortality does not denote species-uniqueness (pp. 284–85). He quotes Paul Sanders on Deuteronomy 32:8, where Sanders comments that the verse conveys the idea that the sons of God “are relatively independent” and “have their own dominions, like YHWH.”³ The implication is that a higher god (Elyon), separate from Yahweh, gave Yahweh and his other sons their dominion—so they are

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

essentially equal. Again, this argument has fatal flaws, and those flaws are addressed in my *HIPHIL* article cited earlier. Two short comments will therefore suffice.

First, the morphology and grammar of Deuteronomy 32:8 make it clear that the nations were assigned to the gods (and Sanders agrees). This is a passive idea (the greater being gives to the lesser). Notice in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 that the text does not actually describe Yahweh being given a portion—the statement is simply declarative (“for Yahweh’s portion is Israel; Jacob is his allotted inheritance”). The “allotted inheritance” could be construed as passive (as Bokovoy contends) or it could be a simple statement of reality. How can we know which it is? Very simply—by noticing the language of Deuteronomy 4:19–20, a passage everyone in the field takes as explicitly parallel to Deuteronomy 32:8. There Yahweh “takes” (לָקַח) his inheritance. It is not given to him—he takes it in power. And if he takes it, then it makes far more sense to say there is none over him. He is the dispenser of the other allotments. This leads to the second point. The fact that other gods have their own dominion does not make them species-equal to Yahweh, especially when their allotments were bestowed while Yahweh’s was taken. This understanding is supported by noticing the two prior verses of Deuteronomy 32 (vv. 6–7), where no less than five El epithets are attributed to Yahweh. It is abundantly clear that Yahweh is not a subordinate in this passage. He is Elyon. And if he is not the high “taker” of his own portion, by what authority does he call Abraham after the nations were divided at Babel? This is consistently portrayed in the Bible as a sovereign act.

A true highlight of Bokovoy’s response (as found in the paragraph spanning pages 284–85) clarifies that a fundamental difference between my understanding of Yahweh’s ontological uniqueness and the LDS position he articulates has to do with our difference of opinion on creation *ex nihilo* and a dualistic versus monistic view of creation. I hold to dualism with respect to the creation—a strict distinction between the Creator and everything else that is. Incidentally, that view does not require seeing Genesis 1:1–3 as creation *ex nihilo* (I tend toward the view that Genesis 1:1–3 describes a refashioning of already

extant material). It does require, though, that the material of Genesis 1:1–3 had been created (at some point) out of nothing. The LDS position rejects creation *ex nihilo* in favor of monism (no initial creation), so that everything is, in some sense, on an equal “created playing field”—at least according to the reviews of that idea that I have seen on the FARMS Web site. This is a place where we clearly disagree and where future dialogue needs to occur. The LDS material I have read on the FARMS site appeals to string theory, for example, as a modern way to lend coherence to a monistic view. String theory, despite its currency, has suffered in recent months at the hands of skeptical physicists, and so this area is ripe for discussion.⁴ The two sides of this issue will invariably affect how each side views the question of ultimate ontology.

I take issue with Bokovoy’s handling of the Athtar episode in the Ugaritic material (pp. 285–86), only because he takes it to indicate a sort of ontological equity between El and Athtar (at least as I read him). I would refer Bokovoy and readers to my article on this episode and defer further comment here, except to say I found it particularly odd that he interpreted Athtar’s relinquishing of the throne as a “type of death.”⁵ Perhaps “typology” was in Bokovoy’s line of thought.

“Humans as Theomorphic Beings” (pp. 288–89)

This section was outside the scope of my paper, and so I said almost nothing in its regard. I have a very different view of the so-called image of God from Bokovoy—and from most evangelicals, I should add. My understanding of this also affects how I would evaluate Bokovoy’s section “Humanity and the Sons of God” (see pp. 296–99). Articulating my position and describing where I would differ with Bokovoy would take a lengthy paper, so I leave the issue, suggesting that we can have

4. I refer here to books like Peter Woit, *Not Even Wrong: The Failure of String Theory and the Search for Unity in Physical Law* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006); and Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

5. Michael S. Heiser, “The Mythological Provenance of Isa. XIV 12–15: A Reconsideration of the Ugaritic Material,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51/3 (2001): 354–69.

the same sort of engagement in the future specifically on this matter. That said, I very much enjoyed Bokovoy's articulation of Adam as a divine council member (pp. 290–95). I hold that position as well, and Bokovoy provided some new grist for that mill with his articulation in this section. It was well done.

“Prophets as Divine Council Members” (pp. 299–305)

This section was also well done, but I think it could be improved with respect to both our thinking. Specifically, I have not thought very much about how the “prophet in the divine council” motif works with respect to Job. I suspect that both Bokovoy and I would define *prophet* rather broadly, and so this opens up several divine council research avenues in Job, such as council mediators for human beings. Bokovoy cites Job 15:7–8 in this regard, but not Job 5:1 (“to which of the holy ones will you turn?”). There is also the issue of how God views his host in terms of their loyalty or fallibility (Job 4:18; 15:15). These areas are, in my experience, very underdeveloped in divine council research.

Much of the rest of Bokovoy's response focuses on Jesus's use of Psalm 82 in John 10. I spent a few pages of my paper on this issue but am currently working on a more detailed exposition. In significant ways, our disagreement, and hence my interaction on the exegesis of John 10:34, will utilize my view of the divine image and not Bokovoy's. As such, a response in this rejoinder is not possible. As a way of illustrating what I mean, Bokovoy's statement that “Jesus in all likelihood drew upon the well-established tradition that humans are gods in formulating his calculated response” (p. 305) is only as coherent as the idea that Israelites understood Genesis 1:26 as putting forth the notion that they were gods—which in turn gets us into the meaning of “the image.” Likewise deserving of discussion is Bokovoy's notion that the angelic priesthood at Qumran means that the Qumranites thought they were gods. The fact that the Qumran population were, through calendar and liturgy, mimicking what they believed to be going on in heaven (“as in heaven, so on earth”) does not compel the conclusion that they thought they were gods. Bokovoy no doubt is familiar with the “glory of Adam” material in this regard and would

naturally interpret that material and other Qumran texts in light of his understanding of Genesis 1:26.

Bokovoy discusses Deuteronomy 32 once again (p. 309), this time in regard to the textual changes that verses 8–9 underwent, as evidenced by the variations between MT, LXX, and Qumran readings. He claims that I fail to address the changes and that this somehow amounts to my overlooking how these changes evince an evolution in Israelite religion from polytheism to monotheism. He is quite mistaken here. On one hand, I did not take the time to address this. My paper was not a thesis or any sort of attempt to cover all the issues. I could not even say that about my dissertation! Bokovoy's *assumptions* lead him to this rebuttal, though. He assumes that the changes to Deuteronomy 32:8–9 occurred during the Second Temple period, that time when the “final redaction” of the Hebrew Bible was presumably occurring. That Bokovoy would say that Second Temple Judaism “was clearly struggling to reconcile its move toward monotheism” (p. 311) demonstrates he is operating from that presupposition. He is not alone here. However, I reject that view (and he could not have known that). I ask Bokovoy to produce a single piece of evidence for the changes occurring during *that* time—as opposed to *later*, during the second century AD when “textual standardization” was occurring. The short answer is that, while everyone assumes this was a Second Temple era change, there is no proof for it. We have the Qumran readings, but we do not have Qumran material for the MT readings. All we have is the MT reading witnessed in MT texts after Qumran. It is quite possible—and I would argue highly likely—that the Qumran reading was changed much later during the rabbinic attempt to deny divine plurality (specifically, the second power in heaven). At Qumran alone there are over 180 references to plural *elohim*, many of them in divine council contexts. This does not speak of a struggle toward monotheism—intolerant monotheism would surface much later, in specific response to the claims of Christians.⁶ Again, Bokovoy's criticisms are misplaced, but for reasons he could not foresee.

6. I recommend to Bokovoy and readers the important work by Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden:

Concluding Remarks

Once again let me express gratitude to the Maxwell Institute and Bokovoy. The divine council is central to a correct understanding of biblical theology, though few have recognized that fact. We do the Bible a hermeneutical disservice when we insist on doing exegesis in light of Augustine, the papacy, Calvin, Luther, or more modern articulators of tradition, as opposed to its original, ancient milieu. I am glad to see more scholars are taking an interest in this crucial topic. The interaction on Israel's divine council needs to continue.

Brill, 1977). Segal establishes that Judaism embraced two powers in heaven (two "good" powers—not one good and another evil) until the second century AD.

