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The Divine Council

One thing that differentiates the Book of Abraham's account of the Creation from the biblical account in Genesis is that the Book of Abraham mentions plural *Gods* as the agents carrying out the 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" (Abr. 4:1). These Gods are mentioned thirty-two times in Abraham 4 and sixteen times in Abraham 5. Significantly, these Gods are said to have taken "counsel" among themselves during the Creation (Abr. 4:26; 5:2–3, 5).

This language of the Gods taking counsel among themselves in Abraham 4–5 appears to be a natural continuation of the description of the premortal council in heaven described in Abraham 3:22–28.¹ One of "rulers" in the premortal council who was "like unto God" is depicted as saying, "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; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (vv. 23–25). In this manner the council of Gods in Abraham 3 counseled with each other during the Creation in Abraham 4–5.

1. It should be noted that unlike the modern versification of the Book of Abraham provided by James E. Talmage starting in the 1902 edition of the Pearl of Great Price, the versification of the Book of Abraham provided in the *Times and Seasons* under Joseph Smith's supervision does not separate chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Abraham, so the premortal council scene in Abraham 3 reads as one unbroken, continuous narrative into the Creation starting in Abraham 4. Indeed, what is today Abraham 3:27–4:2 was just one verse as published by Joseph Smith. "The Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 720.

After the lifetime of Joseph Smith, archaeologists working in Egypt, Syria-Palestine, and Mesopotamia uncovered scores of texts written on papyrus, stone, and clay tablets. As these texts were translated, scholars were surprised to discover creation myths that in many ways paralleled the biblical Creation account while differing in other significant ways.² One way in which these creation myths were different from the Creation account in Genesis was the clear, stark portrayal of what came to be widely called the divine or heavenly council. In many of these myths, a group or family of gods or divinities work together in fashioning the components of the cosmos.³ Other times, the gods engage in divine battle over control of the cosmos.⁴ Whatever the specific case, almost universally these myths described multiple deities serving different roles or functions in the process of Creation.

With this extrabiblical material in mind, and with the discovery of superior manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls that provided better readings of certain biblical passages,⁵ scholars returned to the Hebrew Bible and reevaluated passages that appeared to acknowledge the presence of a divine plurality. Over time, a consensus has been reached that the Bible does indeed portray a multiplicity of gods, even if there remains individual scholarly disagreement over some of the finer details.⁶

2. For an accessible reproduction and discussion of some of the more prominent texts in this genre, as well as a bibliography, see Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 41–73. See also John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006), 179–99; and John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

3. For instance, the ancient Egyptian nine gods of the Heliopolitan Ennead or the eight gods of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad as attested in Pyramid Texts 301, 446, 527, 600 and Coffin Texts 75–81, 107, 335, 714; or the family of the Canaanite god El and his consort Athirat from the Ugaritic texts. For Egyptian cosmogony, see generally Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Creation Myths,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. Donald A. Redford, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:469–72; for Ugaritic cosmology, see generally Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. For instance, the combat of the gods Marduk and Tiamat from Mesopotamia. On such, see “The Epic of Creation” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev ed., trans. Stephanie Dalley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228–77.

5. For instance, consider the reading of Deuteronomy 32:7–9, 43–44 in 4QDeut^a, col. XII + 4QDeut^b, col. II; frg. 5 ii. See Eugene Ulrich, ed., *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010), 240, 242.

6. For a representative sampling of the extensive literature, see Gerald Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35, no. 1 (1964): 22–47;

In contrast to typical Jewish and Christian belief in Joseph Smith's day, the Book of Abraham frankly depicts a plurality of Gods and even uses specific language ("took counsel among themselves," Abr. 4:26) that invokes the presence of what is now widely recognized by scholars as the unquestionably ancient concept of the divine council. This divine council as depicted in the Book of Abraham is composed of, at least,

- "intelligences" and "noble and great ones" (Abr. 3:22);
- "God" (v. 23);
- "one . . . that was like unto God" (v. 24), who was "like unto the Son of Man" (v. 27); and
- "another" who was "second" to the one who was "like unto God" (v. 27).

According to the Book of Abraham, then, God the Father did indeed work with a council, of which Jesus Christ and other "noble and great" premortal intelligences, "souls," or "spirits" (vv. 22–23) were members. The polytheistic divine councils of the ancient Near East might well be echoes of the conception of the divine council portrayed in the Book of Abraham, or vice versa. To be sure, while there are striking similarities between the Book of Abraham and other ancient texts that feature a divine council, there are also notable differences. What is important for the Book of Abraham is that the text broadly (and even in some instances, specifically) shares a similar ancient conception of a heavenly hierarchy or council of divine beings. Besides the examples already provided in print,⁷ take additionally the grave stela of Tjetji, an important

E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 24 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980); S. B. Parker, "Council," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 204–8; S. B. Parker, "Sons of (the) God(s)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 794–800; Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*; and Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 259–73. For Latter-day Saint responses to this scholarship, see 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, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 471–594; and Stephen O. Smoot, "The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 155–80.

7. David E. Bokovoy, "'Ye Really Are Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007):

administrator under the early Eleventh Dynasty (ca. 2134–2060 BC) pharaoh Intef II. In his stela, Tjetji is depicted as traversing the “firmament” (*bi3*) and “heaven” (*hrt*) as he “ascends” (*r*) into the presence of “the great god” (*ntr 3*) and is welcomed into the “divine council” (*d3d3t-ntr*). This divine council is said to be a tribunal of “great ones” (*wrw*, with “seated god” determinative) who extend their arms to Tjetji when he is brought on board the sacred barque of Osiris (*dit n.f 3wy m nšmt*), thus assuring his divinization in the afterlife.⁸

While it is true that Joseph Smith learned from his Hebrew studies that the word for God (Elohim) in the Old Testament is technically a masculine plural noun,⁹ it does not seem likely that he would have learned about the divine council from his Hebrew teacher, Joshua Seixas, since the two seemed to strongly disagree on the implications this fact held for the biblical view of God.¹⁰ In any case, with the exception of the Bible, the surviving ancient texts that overtly depict the divine council were unknown in the Prophet’s day.

267–313, esp. 272–79; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 125–28. See further Joseph Fielding McConkie, “Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 173–98.

8. Aylward M. Blackman, “The Stele of Thethi, Brit. Mus. No. 614,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 17, nos. 1/2 (1931): 55–61, plate VIII, lines 17–18, vertical.

9. On Joseph Smith’s study of Hebrew, see Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

10. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 2, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/2>. It does not appear to have been within Seixas’s disposition to have encouraged a “polytheistic” theology in his student Joseph Smith, since the former was an Orthodox Jew who later “adopted the basic tenets of Unitarian [Christian] belief.” As such, “it is highly doubtful that [he] would have advanced a pantheistic or trinitarian interpretation of Gen. 1” that Joseph Smith favored. Shalom Goldman, “Joshua/James Seixas (1802–1874): Jewish Apostasy and Christian Hebraism in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” *Jewish History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 76, 82; compare Shalom Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 194. Compare also the observation by Louis C. Zucker, “Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 52.

While the theological implications of the divine council remain to be fully explored and articulated,¹¹ what can be said with a fair degree of reasonableness is that the Book of Abraham's depiction of the divine council shares features present in other ancient Near Eastern texts, some of which date to Abraham's day. This reinforces belief that the Book of Abraham is authentically ancient.

Further Reading

- Bokovoy, David E. "Ye Really *Are* Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser Concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John." *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 267–313.
- McConkie, Joseph Fielding. "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils." In *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by C. Wilfred Griggs, 173–98. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986.
- Smoot, Stephen O. "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

11. The Prophet Joseph Smith delivered a discourse in circa May 1841 where, referencing otherwise unknown or unpublished material from the Book of Abraham, he taught: "[An] everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organizations of the 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." "Discourse, circa May 1841, as Reported by Unidentified Scribe," 1, spelling and punctuation standardized, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-circa-may-1841-as-reported-by-unidentified-scribe/1>. On another occasion, the Prophet taught, "I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, [and] the Holy Ghost a distinct personage and a Spirit. These three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." "Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," 1, spelling and punctuation standardized, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/1>. The unity and separateness of the Godhead was obviously an important topic for the Prophet, and subsequent prophets have added to and clarified this subject with additional teachings.