

COSMOLOGY AND WORLD ORDER IN THE OLD TESTAMENT THE DIVINE COUNCIL AS COSMIC-POLITICAL SYMBOL*

The title of this essay is something of a tautology. In its basic sense cosmology is the technical term for speaking about the structure of the universe and the models or conceptuality for representing that structure. In that sense cosmology is the study of the order of the universe. Consistent with the direction of the title, the discussion that follows is less about how the world or universe came to be (cosmogony) and more about the machinery and systems that keep it going (cosmology). More specifically the focus of these remarks is on the cosmological symbolism of the Old Testament and its relation to world order as Israel conceived that and participated in it. To speak about Israel's participation as well as conceptuality, suggests that the use of the term 'symbol' is a rather dynamic one that has to incorporate reality itself as well as its representation. That symbols can participate in or be a part of the reality to which they point is a familiar understanding of symbolic language. Within Christian faith, the incarnation is a claim that all our symbolic anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language about God as personal points to a reality without exhausting it or claiming that the referent is the same as the symbol. The symbol, whether it is numerical, metaphorical, analogical, or whatever, conceals as well as reveals, for it represents something to which it is connected but also something that stands behind it. Because it represents something else, the symbol both informs and stands between us and that to which the symbol refers.

This modest focus on the nature of symbolism is because in this case we are dealing with a form of imagery whose symbolism modern interpreters and readers of Scripture are inclined to emphasize without much [p 423](#) sense of any referential reality lying behind the symbol. My guess is that the Israelites of the Old Testament were inclined to place the emphasis heavily on the side of the real while fully aware of its symbolic force and dependent upon that for its conceptual usefulness.

However accurate or useful such an analysis may be in this instance, let me suggest that one of the central cosmological symbols of the Old Testament is the imagery of the divine council and that the issues of order in Israel and in the cosmos are rooted in and understood as under the aegis of the divine council. Consequently, my aim in this essay is to identify some of the ways in which the council of Yahweh or divine assembly functions as a cosmic-political symbol in the Old Testament.

The Divine Council

In the religious world of the ancient Near East, the cosmos was understood to be ruled by the gods who not only existed in great numbers and could be conceived of as a pantheon but frequently acted as an assembly or council to deliberate and make decisions about the world and its inhabitants. The character

of the heavenly assembly of gods and its function as a deliberating and ruling body has been well described by the Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen in various essays and in a more synthetic form in his study of Mesopotamian religion, *The Treasures of Darkness*. There are many manifestations of the assembly of the gods in Mesopotamian texts. The one most familiar to readers of the Old Testament is the Babylonian Creation Epic, *Enuma eliš*. There, not only do the gods join together to take action against Apsu and decree kingship for Marduk because of his leadership in battle against Tiamat, but the latter deity also has a coterie of gods who plan with and assist p 424 Tiamat against the gods. The character or function of the assembly ‘as a court of law judging and passing sentence on wrongdoers, human or divine’, and as ‘the authority that elected and deposed officers such as kings, human and divine’, is seen in *Enuma eliš* when the assembly decrees death for Tiamat’s lieutenant Kingu because he is the guilty one who contrived the uprising and when the assembly decrees Marduk’s kingship. In Jacobsen’s analysis, there developed in Mesopotamian religion in the third millennium an emphasis upon the ruler metaphor for deity and the notion of the cosmos as a polity. This continued throughout the history of Mesopotamian religion, although in the second and first millennia the rise of Marduk and Aššur to positions of supreme power in the divine world led to a greater sense of ‘unified central power’, what Jacobsen calls a ‘recognizable drive to see the forces that govern the cosmos as basically one and unified’.

While the way in which the divine world and the cosmos were conceived and understood in the ancient Near East was not monolithic and unchanging, this political understanding of the governance of the cosmos, the world of nature and history, centering in the rule of the great god(s) through the actions of the divine assembly was fairly constant. Its presence in the myths and legends of ancient Ugarit has been noted often. There are various references to the council of the gods or the council of El and even a technical term, *puḫru(m)*, shared with Mesopotamia, but not Israel, for referring to the council. Other terms, such as ‘the council of El’ (*ˁdat ʿēl*), ‘the gods’, (*ilm*), ‘the sons of the gods/El’ or ‘divine ones’ (*bn ilm*), and ‘the holy ones’ (*q̄dōšīm*) were present in both Israelite and Canaanite vocabulary for speaking about the heavenly assembly. In the divine assembly at Ugarit, the god Baal comes for a decision and asks the assembly to hand over Yamm, his p 425 enemy. Individual deities in the mythology of Ugarit have their own coterie or entourages.

The ubiquity and significance of this imagery in the theology and cosmology of the ancient Near East keeps us from being surprised to find it appearing in some fashion within Israel, even in highly modified form. The unarguable monotheistic thrust of the Old Testament and Israel’s religion, at least in the official forms in which it comes down to us, has kept us from giving much attention to this conceptuality even though it is widespread in the Old Testament and not confined to any particular era, genre, or corpus of literature. Our primary inclination is to view the whole matter as vestigial in Israel. That such a view, however, is inadequate as an assessment of the role of the divine assembly in the theology and cosmology of the Old Testament is a basic claim of this paper.

The symbol of the divine council is a quite concrete if multi-faceted one. Yahweh is seen as seated upon his throne of kingship in a temple or palace surrounded by a nameless host of divine beings who are sometimes portrayed as present before or beside Yahweh (e.g. [1 Kgs 22:19–21](#)) and elsewhere as coming in to take their position in the presence of Yahweh ([Job 1:6](#); [2:1](#)). The assembly, or members of

it, whether the ‘divine ones’ or the ‘holy ones’ or particular groups within the whole, for example, the seraphim, are sometimes depicted as serving or worshipping the Lord, a part of the holy array that gives God glory ([Isa. 6:1–3](#)). At other times, they converse among themselves or the Lord converses with them, for example, in the prologue to the book of Job and in the vision of Micaiah in [1 Kgs 22:19–23](#) (see below). Until the fairly late period and the height of apocalypticism, none of the members of the divine assembly are named—except for the prophets, on which see below—though there is some individualization in the form of the *mal’āk yhwh*, the *śātān*, and the ‘lying spirit’ in [1 Kings 22](#). The Lord takes counsel with the council, commissions them with certain tasks. They sit as a court or governmental body in which the Lord judges a case or utters a decree. They may go from the assembly to accompany Yahweh in battle. The concerns of the assembly are like that of the divine assembly in Mesopotamian religion: upholding the moral and legal order of society, deciding about victory and defeat in war and politics, electing and deposing kings, controlling and shaping history.

p 426 The fact that the mythopoeic view of reality as the realm in which everything happens through the drama and conflict among the gods has been broken in Israel has led to a denigration of this imagery even though it continues to play a part long past the period of the Old Testament. But the conception of the divine council belongs to the move that takes place in Israel in which there is a radical centralization or integration of divine power in one deity, Yahweh. The cosmic forces are seen as unified in Yahweh and not divided. The notion of the divine council keeps more sharply in mind and underscores the fact that we do not have simplicity without complexity in the divine world and the governance of the cosmos. The demonstration of that fact and its cosmological significance is the task that remains in the rest of this essay. It will be done by a series of claims about the place of the divine council and the justification of those claims.

1. *The machinery for the divine governance of the sociopolitical structures of society centers in Yahweh’s rule over and through the divine council.*

The rule of the cosmos is in the hands of Yahweh, but the context in which that rule takes place is the activity of the council where Yahweh’s decrees directing the human community and the divine world are set forth and through whom they are communicated or enacted. This is seen in earlier literature and in later texts. The narratives of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History show this direction particularly in the figure of the ‘messenger (*mal’āk*) of Yahweh’ or figures who function in that fashion.

The story of the announcement of a child to Abraham and Sarah and the subsequent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah revolves around p 427 messengers of the Lord who bring the divine decrees. The way in which the conceptuality of the divine council creates an interaction of the one and the many is seen in the manner in which the story speaks first of three men who come to visit Abraham and then in v. 9 shifts from the plural into the singular and eventually in v. 13 identifies Yahweh as the singular one who speaks to Sarah. After the birth announcement to Sarah, the narrative resumes speaking of ‘the men’ (vv. 16 and 22), and then after they have reached Sodom, they are referred to as ‘the two messengers’ ([19:1](#)) at the beginning and simply ‘the men’ in the rest of the narrative.

The account of the visit to Abraham and Sarah fits with a series of narratives in which a messenger or messengers of Yahweh come to announce the birth of a child ([Gen. 16 \[21\]](#) and [Judg. 13](#)) or to announce the Lord's imminent salvation or judgment (e.g. [Gen. 19; 21; 31:11](#)), decrees of the Lord for the direction of the human community. The linking of the two stories is important in that it shows that the function of the messengers from the Lord is not tied to any one kind of action. In a single narrative sequence, the divine messengers announce the birth of a child to Abraham and Sarah and then go on to carry out the investigation and destruction of Sodom. Their enterprise must be tied to the divine word that 'I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me' ([Gen. 18:21](#))—the Lord's inquiry through the messengers from the assembly—and the clear statement of the messengers that 'the Lord has sent us to destroy it'. One of the primary functions of the members of the heavenly assembly is to be the messengers sent from the assembly not only to communicate the divine decree, but in some cases to be the agents of the Lord's purpose. That their words and activity are one with that of Yahweh is everywhere clear, a fact that was always true of messengers in the ancient Near East.

While it is not possible to look at all of the texts that reflect the involvement of the divine council in the machinery of the divine government, there are two or three places in the Deuteronomistic History that reflect the role of the messengers in a somewhat different fashion. These have to do with the activity of the assembly in directing and participating in the Lord's saving and judging purposes as carried out through Israel's warfare.

p 428 One of these texts is [Josh. 5:13–15](#), where again 'a man' appears, this time to the leader of the Israelite army. That this figure is a member of the divine assembly is immediately indicated by his identification of himself as 'the commander of the army of Yahweh' and his command to Joshua to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground, that is, before the Lord's representative. No message is given, although it is frequently conjectured that such a message has been lost from the text in the traditioning or textual process. It is uncertain, however, whether any message was necessary in this case. The general of Yahweh's heavenly armies had come to the general of Yahweh's earthly armies to indicate that the holy war against Canaan had begun and that the armies of heaven were joined with those of earth in the enterprise (cf. [Josh. 10:10–12](#)). It is clear, in any event, that the first battle in that war takes place in the very next verses of the text.

In the Song of Deborah, [Judg. 5:23](#), the *mal'āk yahweh*, the messenger of the Lord, calls for a curse against Meroz because it did not come out to the help of the Lord in battle. The conception of the warfare of Israel as a synergism involving the armies of heaven and earth and under the direction of the Lord through the Lord's messengers and representatives is underscored by this text as well as by those occasions in the narrative texts where there is reference to the march of Yahweh and the divine army ([2 Sam. 5:22–29; 2 Kgs 6:15–19; 7:6](#)). One can add to this other poetic texts that convey the same understanding:

The Lord came from Sinai,
dawned from Seir upon us;

he shone forth from Mount Paran.

With him were myriads of holy ones;

at his right a host of his own ([Deut. 33:2–3](#)).

Or:

The chariots of God were two myriads,

A thousand the warriors/archers of the Lord,

when he came from Sinai with the holy ones.

([Ps. 68:18](#))

p 429 The picture of the cosmic elements aiding Yahweh in battle ([Judg. 5:20](#); [Josh. 10:10–12](#); [Hab. 3](#)) is consistent with this depiction of the wars of Israel as a facet of Yahweh’s cosmic strategy.

One further text should be added to this particular complex, and that is the appointment of Gideon as commander of the armies of Israel in [Judges 6](#). That decision is also communicated by the Lord through ‘the messenger of the Lord’, who is interchangeable with Yahweh in the text (compare [6:11–13](#) and [20–24](#) with [6:14–18](#) and [25](#)).

Perhaps the most familiar and obvious manifestation of the machinery and processes of divine government through the divine assembly is seen in the figure of the prophet whose identity and functional context is set in the divine assembly. Enough discussion of this conceptual setting for prophecy has come forth over the last two or three decades that it is not necessary to lay that out in detail. It is sufficient in this context simply to call to mind three texts that explicitly place the prophet in the divine assembly or as one who has access to the council of Yahweh and indeed suggest that the identity and authenticity of a prophet is directly tied to his or her credentials as one who has stood in the council of the Lord.

In [Amos 3:7](#) the prophet says: ‘Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his council/counsel (*sôd*) to his servants the prophets.’ The use of the word *sôd* is particularly significant in this context because it clearly has in mind the council of Yahweh as the place where the divine decrees are set forth to be carried by the Lord’s messengers and prophets to the appropriate parties. But the term also means counsel or plan, that is, it incorporates the notion of the Lord’s purpose that is determined and set forth in the divine council and then carried out by it. The English word-play is appropriate and perhaps the only way to convey correctly the force that is conveyed by the text as it speaks of divine governance as both plan and process, direction and procedural structures. The purpose and intention in the divine government is clearly that of the Lord, but that does not happen apart from the structures created for the government of the cosmos: *Surely the Lord does not do anything unless he has revealed it to his servants the prophets.*

Perhaps the most explicit statement about the divine council as the identifying and authenticating framework in which Israelite prophecy is to be set is [Jer. 23:18–23](#), which is an indictment of the false prophets of Jeremiah’s time:

p 430 For who [among them] has stood in the council (*sôd*) of the Lord

to perceive and hear his word,

or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

Behold the storm of the Lord!

Wrath has gone forth,

a whirling storm;

it will whirl down upon the heads of the wicked.

The anger of the Lord will not turn back

until he has carried out and established

the decisions of his heart/mind.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

I did not send the prophets,

yet they ran anyway;

I did not speak to them,

yet they prophesied anyway.

If they had stood in my council (*sôd*),

then they would have announced my words to my people,

and they would have turned them back from their evil way,

and from the evil of their doings.

The authority of the prophet and the distinction between true and false prophetic words is directly tied to the prophet’s access to the divine council. For that is where the decrees of God about nature and history are set forth and the procedures for their implementation are worked out (see on [Gen. 1:26–28](#) below as well as the texts from [1 Kgs 22](#) and [Isa. 6](#)). In this text, therefore, the prophet is seen as having identity, vocation, and authentication as a member of the divine council, which is the context in which the divine plans (*m^ezimmôt libbô*) are declared and carried out.

The story of Micaiah ben Imlah before the kings of Israel and Judah in [1 Kings 22](#) is a vivid portrayal of the prophet's vision of the divine council, which is the reason that he alone out of all the prophets has the true word of the Lord. Micaiah's report of the vision in [1 Kgs 22:19–23](#) is worth setting forth in full for the way in which it shows the dynamic of the divine assembly as the setting for prophecy and its place in the cosmic governance:

p 431 Then Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" And one said one thing, and one said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, "I will entice him". And the Lord said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go forth and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets". And he said, "You are to entice him, and you will succeed; go forth and do so". Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has spoken evil concerning you.'

Here now, in distinction from the Amos and Jeremiah texts, is a vivid depiction of the heavenly assembly in session, working out the Lord's plan and revealing it to the Lord's true prophet. The decree is clearly that of the Lord. It is Yahweh's word that initiates the conversation in the council. But conversation and discussion do go on about how to implement the Lord's plan. Yahweh poses the question or plan but asks the council who will carry it out. There follows discussion and then a spirit (*rûah*) volunteer, a member of the assembly. Yahweh then asks how the spirit will carry out the plan. When the spirit indicates a strategy, then Yahweh tells the spirit to go and do it and announces that the strategy will be successful.

Herein is a very complex interaction of Yahweh's control and the involvement of the council in developing the plan that the Lord commands. Yahweh's direction and decree is the intent that comes to realization; the spirit is the agency of Yahweh's purpose; the prophet is the messenger of the divine word, and the council is the place where all this is worked out.

In Isaiah's call vision in [Isa. 6:1–13](#), the call of the prophet takes place in the midst of the assembly gathered about the throne of the king Yahweh. Conversation goes on again in the assembly, but it is confined to the expression of praise to Yahweh until the Lord addresses the assembly and asks for a messenger to carry out its decree. Isaiah's response not only creates a vocation for the prophet but sets under way the decree of the Lord in the council. The vision of the Lord of Hosts and the sense of the Lord's holiness in contrast to the people's sinfulness becomes definitive for Isaiah's message.

An echo of this conversation occurs in the prologue to [Isaiah 40–55](#) in vv. [1–11](#). There the Lord addresses the assembly and decrees the end of Israel's punishment and a message of comfort to be delivered p 432 ('Speak tenderly to Jerusalem'). Once more conversation ensues in the assembly as a voice proclaims or calls to the assembly or a member of it (cf. [Isa. 6:3](#)). In v. [6](#) this voice is directed either to the prophet, as commonly assumed, or to Jerusalem, to proclaim the word of the Lord to the exiled people.

While other texts could be marshaled to undergird the general picture given here, the data presented are sufficient to establish the claim that the divine council is a fundamental symbol for the Old Testament understanding of how the government of human society by the divine world is carried out. The birth of children to bring blessing into the human community and carry on the line of God's chosen ones, the word and process of judgment, the declaration of Yahweh's wars and the carrying out of them, the choice of Yahweh's leaders, the announcement of deliverance and comfort, the varied prophetic declaration of the effecting word of God in history—all of these are declared in the council of Yahweh.

In another context, we have suggested that there are three primary theological images reflected here, images that are central to the Old Testament conception of world order. They are the conceptions of God as king, judge, and warrior. These are intimately related but point to particular aspects of the divine government. The picture of God as king points to the power and rule of God, power to control nature and history, rule in the processes of ordering and governing. To speak of God as judge is to claim the Old Testament's 'way of saying that there is an ethical grounding of reality and that history and the cosmos embody a moral accountability' that will in the end be the vindication of the right. The imagery of God as warrior is a pointer to the power of God to effect a righteous rule and carry out the purposes that have been set by the decisions and plans of God's mind or heart ([Jer. 23:20](#)). Each of these images has its reflection in the understanding of human kingship in Israel, its implication for the task of the prophet, and its location in the activities of the divine council. As an entourage of the Great King, [p 433](#) the assembly pays homage to the king ([Isa. 6](#)) and carries out the rule of the king by the communication of the divine decrees. As a judicial court, they investigate the human situation when crimes have been done and human outcry has been lifted to God, and they carry out the Lord's verdict ([Gen. 19](#)). As the Lord's army, the heavenly assembly marches with the Lord in the interventions of Yahweh in war. David does not go up into battle without inquiring of Yahweh what he should do. In [2 Sam. 5:22–25](#) he is told to attack from the rear and 'when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then bestir yourself, for then the Lord has gone out before you to smite the army of the Philistines' (v. [24](#)). The 'sound of marching' is that of Yahweh's army leading Israel's army into battle. The prophets are the heralds or proclaimers of Yahweh's war. Elisha figures in several legends involving the armies of Yahweh against the Syrian army ([2 Kgs 6:8–23](#); [6:24–7:20](#)). In [Isa. 13:1–22](#) a prophetic oracle depicts Yahweh summoning his armies of heaven and earth to go into battle against Babylon. Later in Deutero-Isaiah, the muster of the heavenly armies is announced again ([Isa. 40:26](#); [45:12](#)).

In many and complex ways, therefore, the maintenance of the social order and the direction of history is a result of the purposes of Yahweh as set forth, planned, and carried out through the divine assembly and its representatives, whether human or divine. Kings are raised up and put down, war is declared and carried out, judgment against peoples and cities is decreed and enacted, salvation and blessing are announced—all through the machinery of the divine council. What has not been explicitly identified as a part of this divine governance through the processes of the divine council is the act of creation itself, but that is also within the provenance of the divine council, though in quite particular ways.

2. A second claim, therefore, points to this dimension of the function of the divine council, to wit that *the divine council was present at the creation (Job 38:6) and involved indirectly in that process. As above, the focus is more cosmological than cosmogonic, order as much or more than origin.* Two aspects of the place of the divine council in the creative activity can be identified.

p 434 a. The clearest portrayal of a cosmogonic order in the Old Testament is the account of the creation in the Priestly stratum ([Gen. 1:1–2:4a](#)). The repeated, step-by-step stages of God’s creation of the universe reach their climax in the creation of *’ādām*, the human creature. That act, however, arises out of a decree to the divine assembly: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness’ ([Gen. 1:26](#)). While other interpretations are possible, the most plausible understanding of these first person plural verbs and suffixes is that God’s words are a directive to the divine council. At the point in the text where the narrative speaks of a close relation between the divine world and the human world and suggests that the human partakes of the divine in some fashion, it refers not simply to the deity but to the whole divine world, the divine beings. The human is both a consequence of Yahweh’s decision in and to the council and a reflection of the divine world as it is embodied in the heavenly assembly. The *ben ’ādām* is like the *ben ’ēlīm*, a notion expressed explicitly also in [Psalm 8](#).

What is also important in this connection is that this act is an important stage in the provision for order in the cosmos. It is the point at which the ordering of nature moves into the ordering of history and creation moves into providence. The creation of the human creature is the establishment of a representative from the divine world to rule the created order. The image of the divine ones is placed on earth to embody and represent the divine ones in subduing, ruling, and governing the earth. The creation of male and female provides for the sustaining of that rule in the perpetuation of the creation. As Phyllis Bird has put it: ‘The Priestly account of creation in its present form is concerned not only with the sequence of the orders of creation but with the means by which the orders of life will fill the newly created world and maintain their transitory existence in it.’

The conversation of Yahweh with the divine ones occurs two other times in the Primeval History, in these cases within the Yahwistic p 435 narrative. At the conclusion to the judgment speech in [Genesis 3](#), the Lord says:

Behold the human one has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now (*w^e’attāh*), lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever ...

The text clearly has in mind the most fundamental relation and distinction in the created order, that between the human world and the divine world. The expression ‘one of us’ refers to the divine ones who make up the council of Yahweh and comes into the text as an implicit conversation within the council at the point where a possible breach in the relationship is present, where a human appropriation of the divine world is potential and the divine world must say no. The verse must be seen against [3:5](#), which also refers to the divine worlds, the gods: ‘And you will be like gods (*kēlōhîm*), knowing (*yōd^e’ē*) good and evil.’

The judgment upon the human creature in the Yahwistic story arises out of the realization that the human creature brings about a kind of disorder in the universe in breaking through the boundary distinction between the divine world and the human world. That is confirmed in the other place where Yahweh addresses the divine council ([Gen. 11:6–7](#)):

This is only the beginning of what they will do. Now therefore (*w^e'attah*) nothing which they decide to do shall be out of their reach. Come let us go down and there confuse their language.

As in [Gen. 3:22](#), the building of the tower at Babel is a sin against God as an effort to move into the divine world, the divine domain. The threatened loss of creature limits ([3:22a](#) and [11:6–7](#)) leads in both instances (*w^e'attāh*) to the judging activity of God. In its judgment speech, [Genesis 11](#), like [3:22](#), reflects a decree within the assembly to create human disorder for the sake of cosmic order, the confusion among humankind to inhibit the breakdown of the orderly relationship between divine and human worlds.

Elsewhere I have sought to explicate the meaning of these Priestly and Yahwistic allusions to the divine decision in the council of Yahweh as follows:

The line between that closeness to deity which is God's intention and a declaration of the high estate of humanity and that closeness to deity which is human arrogance and an attempt to claim all the prerogatives of deity is a very narrow one. One is an exaltation given by God in the creation, which in the context of the story is clearly set within certain limits; the other is a self-exaltation assumed or attempted by the creature [p 436](#) in the face of the set limitations ... The absence of either emphasis—P's assertion of *kidmûtēnû* or J's rejection of *k^e'ahad mimmennû*—would significantly shift or distort the intention of the narrative of [Genesis 1–11](#) ... In a very real sense the whole narrative of the Primeval history flows out of this tension between being created like *lōhîm* and seeking to become *lōhîm*. One points to the human possibility; the other to its plight.

b. The second place where we see the divine council involved in the creative activity is specifically Deuteronomistic and has to do with the order of nations and peoples. In [Deuteronomy 32](#) the origin of Israel is set in the following context:

Remember the days of old,
 consider the years long past;
 ask your father and he will inform you;
 your elders and they will tell you.
 When Elyon apportioned the nations,
 when he divided humankind,

he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
 according to the number of the gods (*b^enê ^elōhîm*);
 the Lord's own portion was his people,
 Jacob his allotted share.

Embedded in this long poem is the tradition of Yahweh (here in the form of Elyon) apportioning the nations among the divine ones who make up the heavenly assembly. The order of nations is rooted in the order of heaven. Yahweh's decree determines that order, but it is fixed according to the number of the members of the assembly. The term *b^enê ^elōhîm* is one of the standard designations for the members of the divine world over which Yahweh rules. In this case they are seen as the gods of the nations, the peoples being determined according to their number and placed under their rule.

It is interesting and somewhat surprising that Deuteronomy, whose polemic against the gods and religious practices of the surrounding peoples is so strong, should nevertheless see the nations of the earth as belonging to these gods. That is, of course, at least in part an effort to [p 437](#) account for what one found in looking at the nations and people. But the context in which all of that is placed is the rule of Yahweh over and reflected through the divine council. While this poem may be early and originate from a non-Deuteronomistic context, it is consistent with the same understanding stated elsewhere in two late Deuteronomistic texts:

Beware lest you lift up your eyes to the heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, *things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven* ([4:19](#)).

And:

They turned to serving other gods, worshiping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them ([29:26](#)).

3. Related to both of the preceding claims is the fact that *the maintenance of justice and righteousness is the foundation of the universe, the responsibility of the divine council, and the issue upon which hang both the stability of the universe and the stability and effective reality of the divine world.*

[p 438](#) H.H. Schmid has made an effective case for the view that the notion of 'righteousness' (*ṣedeq/ṣ^edāqāh*) in the Old Testament is fundamentally an all-encompassing world order. Starting from an examination of *ma'at* in Egyptian thought and looking at the close connection between the cosmic and the ethical-social order that is a common feature of ancient Near Eastern thought, Schmid contends that ' "righteousness" is not understood narrowly as a legal matter, but as universal world order, as comprehensive salvation'. It is his judgment that 'ancient Near Eastern political, and social order find their unity under the concept of "creation" '.

Such an understanding of the close association between the Old Testament concepts of righteousness and justice and the maintenance of the world order that is set forth in the creation and demonstrated in nature and history is taken up by Douglas Knight in his treatment of cosmogony and ethics. He summarizes this understanding as follows:

YHWH created the world according to $\text{ṣ}^{\text{e}}\text{dāqā}$, 'righteousness', a principle of moral and cosmic orderliness similar to the Egyptian *ma'at*. When $\text{ṣ}^{\text{e}}\text{dāqā}$ prevails, the world is at harmony, in a state of well-being, in *šālôm*. An act of sin in the religious sphere or injustice in the social sphere can inject discord and shatter *šālôm*. It then takes a decisive act of *mišpāt*, 'justice', to restore the *šālôm* and reestablish the $\text{ṣ}^{\text{e}}\text{dāqā}$. This *mišpāt* is not, as in our judicial system, an impartial judging between the violator and the injured party. Rather, it is an act of partiality which is not concerned simply to punish the guilty but to restore the victim to full participation in the community. Only when all deserving persons enjoy the fullness of life in community can $\text{ṣ}^{\text{e}}\text{dāqā}$ reign. World order is thus not a static concept, an essence which exists impervious to all else. It is predicated directly on full moral behavior in the social world, and YHWH is perceived to be its protector par excellence.

It is against this background that one must look at one of the texts in which the council of Yahweh is most explicitly present, [Psalm 82](#). It [p 439](#) takes place entirely in the world of the gods, although what is clear from the story is that that world is totally ruled and controlled by the Lord. The psalm depicts a meeting of the 'divine council' (v. [1](#)) in which God rises and pronounces judgment on the gods. The reason for the verdict against them is spelled out in detail and unambiguous. The divine ones, the gods who are supposed to provide for order/righteousness among the peoples of the earth, have utterly failed to do so. They have shown partiality to the wicked and failed to maintain the right of the poor and the weak. The consequence of this is stated to be a shaking of the foundations of the world. The failure to maintain order, which in this instance is clearly seen to be the maintenance of righteousness in the moral sphere, the resistance to a disorder that does in the poor and gives the rich and the wicked control, is seen to be manifest in a kind of cosmic disorder. The cosmos comes apart when righteousness is not maintained. Yahweh as guarantor of the world's order is also guarantor of the spheres of righteousness and justice. Indeed these are one and the same thing. The equation can be reversed and say the same thing.

The text assumes that justice as the center of world order is a responsibility of the divine world as a whole. Failure to bring that about calls into question the divine world. Indeed its consequence is a decree against the divine world that relativizes it and renders the divine ones mortal. The gods are condemned to death. The fate of the divine world, of gods as well as of human beings, is determined in the divine council. The psalm uncovers as well as any other text the primary places in which Israel's *departure* from the common theology of the ancient Near East is seen to be a radical intensification of matters that it *shares* with that milieu—the concern for justice and the divine assembly as the sphere in which divine order is worked out. In the latter case, the intensification is such that the divine world loses its status and Yahweh alone is seen as the one who can rule and judge the earth. The many are completely subjected to the rule and control of the one.

4. If the maintenance of world order as the manifestation of righteousness is a responsibility of the divine assembly, it is not surprising that *at the key point where the issue of the justice of God and the problem of undeserved suffering comes to the fore, the divine council is the setting or the occasion for the raising of the issue.*

That is seen of course in the prologue to the book of Job. There we encounter a formal gathering of the gods or the divine ones, who present [p 440](#) themselves at what seems to be a set time ([1:6](#) and [2:1](#)). There ensues a conversation between the Lord and Satan who has been a kind of ‘roving investigator’ and is here to report and receive orders as the other members of the council. In these two scenes, we see ‘two heavenly councils in which Job’s fate is at stake’. The meeting of the council, the conversation between the Lord and Satan, and the consequent activity of Satan at the direction, or better, permission of the Lord provide the setting for the dialogues in which the justification of God’s ways as occasioned by the experience of meaningless suffering is the central issue. Once again the fundamental matters of righteousness and world order originate in or out of the divine council. The issue of suffering is seen not to be a matter that has its primary ground anthropologically. It is raised *in the divine world* precisely where responsibility for order is lodged and thus righteousness is to be maintained. That is an important Old Testament claim. The justification of God’s ways is at one and the same time seen to be an issue of human integrity and a concern within the divine assembly. The casual reader of the book, drawn to the intensity of the dialogues, will see the question as one raised out of human experience, which is indeed where human beings raise it. In Job, however, it is raised in the context of the machinery and procedures by which the divine council under the rule of Yahweh maintains a righteous order in nature and history.

5. A final claim that needs little explication is found in *the recognition that the council of the Lord is the place where the goal of all creation, praise, begins.*

That is explicitly seen in the vision of Isaiah in [Isaiah 6](#). It is a frequent theme of the psalms. At the conclusion of [Psalm 103](#) when the kingship of Yahweh is declared, the psalmist concludes with a call to praise:

[p 441](#) Bless the Lord, O you his angels,

you mighty ones who do his word,

hearkening to the voice of his word.

Bless the Lord, all his hosts,

his ministers that do his will.

Bless the Lord, all his works,

in all places of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul (vv. [20–22](#)).

[Psalm 148](#) begins its orderly list of all the elements of the cosmos who are called to praise the Lord with a call to ‘all his angels ... all his hosts’ (v. 2), and [Psalm 29](#) initiates the praise of the Lord who is enthroned forever as king by calling the divine ones (*b^enē ’ēlîm*) to ascribe glory to the Lord. If all reality finds its ultimate purpose in the praise of God, the divine assembly leads the choir.

Conclusion

The imagery of the divine council belongs to the common thought world of ancient Near Eastern mythology and cosmology. As such, it has carried little weight in theological interpretation of the Old Testament, although most treatments of Old Testament theology give some attention to it. It is so clearly a manifestation of what one theologian has recently noted, drawing on Mary Douglas’s work: ‘The literature in the social sciences and philosophy of religion clearly stresses that symbols are always embodied in cultural, linguistic, social, and institutional practices of communal life.’ Consequently, the imagery is relegated to the archaic mythological realm and easily dispensed with.

Its place in biblical cosmology is, however, a significant one, as we have tried to show. Three interrelated features of biblical cosmology are highlighted via the symbolism of the divine council: (1) the political character of the understanding of cosmology; (2) the creation and ordering of the realms of nature and history; and (3) the conceptual holding together of the one and the many, the absolute and plurality.

The symbol of the divine council is fundamentally a sociopolitical one expressing the activity of divine government in political terms, that is, as having to do with the affairs of the human world and the divine world. That happens in the images that are associated with God’s rule [p 442](#) over the divine assembly—the creator who effects and grounds all reality, creating not only nature but history in the creation of humankind and the allotting of the peoples and their territories; the king, who is the guarantor of order and control in the universe; the warrior, whose power effects that rule and control of the cosmos; and the judge, who ensures that the order of the world is truly a righteous order.

In another context, I have described this political cosmology through the conceptual vehicle of the divine council—a symbol that was understood to be in some way a perception of reality, as the prophetic experience testifies—in the following manner:

The mythopoeic conception of the heavenly assembly, the divine council, is the Bible’s way of pointing to a transcendent ordering and governing of the universe, of which all human governments and institutions are a reflection, but even more it is the machinery by which the just rule of God is effective, that is, powerful, in the universe. The divine council gives political shape to the reality of God. Whatever is said about God’s power, unity, character, and purpose in some fashion is to be understood in political and social terms, whether one is speaking of God’s ‘being’ or God’s ‘activity’. The images of God as king, judge, and warrior are not, therefore, individualistic images but social metaphors in that they are tied to conceptions of the divine assembly.

The council clearly functioned as the messengers of the divine decrees, but the council was an image that also spoke of the making of decisions, the development of strategies, and planning for the effecting of the Lord's rule. The checks and balances system placed on kingship as the agency of the Lord's rule centered in the prophet, who was in some fashion a member of the divine council or a messenger from it, bringing the divine decrees and anointing or deposing kings on order from the Great King.

p 443 The concern for order in the cosmos as a function of the divine assembly under the rule of Yahweh is seen not only in the governance of Israel but also in the way in which the council is the context in which the relationship between humankind and the divine world is worked out, the nations and peoples of the earth are established and governed, and righteousness as the foundation of the cosmos is maintained. The case of Job is a particular one in which the integrity or 'right' of both Job (e.g. [Job 27:1–6](#)) and the Lord is at stake. His is literally a 'test case' arising out of the activity of the council in watching over the universe.

The divine assembly is an image for speaking of a system for divine governance and order that is intimately involved with the world but not coterminous with it. The cosmological structure of the universe is operative within the universe but transcends it. The pious ones of Mesopotamia and Syria—Palestine were convinced that all they could see and comprehend and investigate of the universe about them was not all there was to the world. There was the world of the gods that lay behind the universe. The divine council was Israel's way of making a similar claim. In an almost paradoxical way, the divine assembly safeguarded the distinction between God and the created order by pointing to a world that interacted with it but was God's world, as social in character as the world God made. The defining of the human was in terms of this social reality that imaged the purpose, the plan, the word and decision of God.

In all of the manifestations of the divine council imagery we encounter Israel's way of dealing in a theological and foundational way with the problem of the one and the many and how they are held together within a single reality that is the cosmos. While in some sense it would seem that that issue was resolved or disappeared with the monotheistic thrust, to assume that is to forget that what took place was a radical centralization of divine power and reality in one deity in whom the complexity and plurality of the universe was not lost but ruled. The plurality and diversity of experiences and phenomena that make up the creation point to a complex cosmos that is allowed both its complexity and its ordered direction by a fully integrated divine world p 444 whose rule by one is as clear as its social character. The divine assembly of ancient Israel thus holds as one reality a monistic impulse in a pluralistic cosmic structure. That such a dialectic was intentional and at the heart of Old Testament theology and cosmology is nowhere clearer than in the ancient name by which the God of the Old Testament was known and is still praised, 'the Lord of Hosts'.