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## The Divine Council in the Pentateuch

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### *Introduction*

As we begin, I'd like to thank the committee members for the Pentateuch section for inviting me to deliver this paper. I've done a lot of work on the topic of the divine council, so it was easy to accept the invitation. The subject matter is far-ranging, so I'll have to be selective given the time constraints.

It might not seem like an obvious need, but at the outset we need to talk about what we mean by terms like "divine council" or "divine assembly" and the broad stroke basics of what that council or assembly is said to do.

### **A. Perspective: Canaan/Ugarit, not Mesopotamia**

Some scholars want to restrict the term in Israelite context to those spirit beings described as *benê 'elohîm* / *benê 'elîm* / *benê 'elyôn*, thus excluding *mal'akîm* (angels). The idea is, apparently, to restrict council talk and council participation under Yahweh's sovereignty to the presumed decision makers, as opposed to mere messengers.

I think this approach is incorrect for a number of reasons. The approach has methodological flaws in stemming from assuming the predominant analogy for Israel's council is Mesopotamia. While Mesopotamian religion of course had a divine council, all the scholars of which I'm aware who have made Israelite divine council research a special focus have argued quite coherently that the best analogy for Israelite thinking on the subject is Canaanite, especially the Ugaritic material, not Mesopotamia.

As Mesopotamian specialists like the late Thorkild Jacobsen have pointed out, the Mesopotamian divine assembly was basically two-tiered polity of authority, the greater and lesser gods of the pantheon or, perhaps more precisely, the senior gods and other deities who determine destiny.<sup>1</sup> Scholars whose divine council research focuses on Canaan and Israel see either three or four tiers within the council, with members of all tiers engaged somewhere in the council's activities, not just the two levels of Mesopotamia. Those interested could read the sources in the handout.

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<sup>1</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Mesopotamia," *JNES* 2:3 (1943): 168-169.

The work of Marjo Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine*, is especially telling in this regard. For example, there are actually several councils at Ugarit. The council of El has overarching importance, but Baal has a council, as does Didanu. These councils include servant deities, which go by various job descriptions, including *ml'km*. And those messengers are indeed described as deities (*'ilm*). There is no reason to exclude them from the Israelite divine council conception. Even ancestral spirits of the human dead are called a council (*sod*) at Ugarit.<sup>2</sup> All of this is consistent with a broad definition of biblical *'elohim* as disembodied spirits belonging to the spiritual world. Such a definition not only makes sense of biblical plural usage of the term *'elohim*, which is used to describe a range of disembodied beings, but also shows the presence of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible to be no indication of polytheism. For the biblical writers, Yahweh is an *'elohim*, but no other *'elohim* is Yahweh. He is incomparable or, as I like to say, species unique.

The Canaanite analogy informs us that one cannot presume that the council is only composed of Yahweh's "sons" and not *ml'km* because far more neutral language is used when the council participates with God in making decisions ("spirits" – 1 Kings 22:19-23; "Watchers" – cp. Dan 4:17, 24; "assembly of the holy ones" – Psa 89:5 [Eng]). On what basis can angels and divine throne guardians (*cherubim*, *seraphim*) be excluded from a description like "spirits" and "holy ones" in such descriptions of council activities?

## **B. Purpose**

So what's the point of the divine council? God certainly doesn't need one, but he chooses to allow his intelligent creations participate with him in how he wants things done—sort of like the Church. God doesn't need us, either, but he has chosen to propel his will on earth through his believing household. I like the way Patrick Miller put it: "[T]he 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."<sup>3</sup> We see this in a number of divine council scenes, where the divine council meets to enact Yahweh's decrees (the most obvious: Dan 4:17, 24; Dan 7:0-10; 1 Kings 22:19-23). The idea holds true in the Pentateuch. Miller writes:

The story of the announcement of a child to Abraham and Sarah and the subsequent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah revolves around messengers of the Lord who

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<sup>2</sup> Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 270-271.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol," in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (vol. 267; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 426.

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. . . . 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.<sup>4</sup>

At this point it may be advisable to say something about council rebellions. Psalm 82 would seem to be clear that God's divine council is a metaphor for those beings who work for God. When God's spirit-servants fail or rebel, the relationship turns to one of judgment, estrangement, and hostility. Schloen's work on understanding the divine council in terms of a Canaanite, patriarchal household is helpful here. Servants are part of the household and, as the story of the search for a wife for Isaac informs us, could play crucial roles in the activity of the household. Disobedient servants were cast out by sale or exile, or worse. When God puts the *'elohim* of the nations under eschatological judgment in Psalm 82, the message being communicated isn't "Show up for work on Monday, everything's fine." Rather, it's "You're fired ... I'm looking for your replacements now, and I have my eye on those human believers who will be glorified and placed over the nations that you were supposed to rule in my stead (Rev 2:26-27; 3:21); they'll end up judging angels (1 Cor 6:3) because they outrank them as my chosen children, and everything will return to my intentions in Eden—one blended divine and human family, ruling with me over this wonderful world and enjoying it forever." On a side note, language like this makes it clear that the divine council worldview of ancient Israel has broad ramifications and a number of fascinating connections in the New Testament. Demonstrating these connections was one motivation behind my book, *The Unseen Realm*. There are many and they *aren't* trivial.

### C. Summary

All this leads me to say that we need to exercise care with respect to the material we use for analogizing Israel's council. Israelite council talk includes all spiritual beings loyal to Yahweh. Those who are not are estranged in terms of a working relationship, but of course are still part of the spiritual realm. Because the language in the Hebrew Bible and external sources like

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 426-427.

Ugaritic texts that are more appropriate parallels describe council membership very broadly, the notion of the council ought not be restricted to those beings we perceive as decision makers (as though we could know that with precision). Broadly speaking, the divine council is the heavenly host entourage of Yahweh, members of which have varied roles in hierarchy. One such role is participatory governance under Yahweh's sovereign rule.

Perhaps a modern analogy of government in the United States will help make the point. We can speak of the federal legislature, by which we mean that branch of government responsible for passing laws. The term "Congress" is a synonym. However, our Congress has two parts: the Senate and the House. Decision-making members of these two bodies, and hence the Congress, are elected. The two houses of Congress both have "guardian officers" (e.g., the Sergeant at Arms) and other support staff who are appointed, not elected. Though they have no decision-making power, they are nevertheless part of "Congress" in certain contexts where that term is used. For instance, when we say "Congress is in session" we don't mean that everyone who isn't elected gets the day off. They have roles to play. "Congress" can therefore refer to only those elected officials who make laws, or can refer to the entire bureaucratic apparatus of the federal legislature. So, I'm a big tent guy when it comes to the divine council.

Let's turn now to some particulars in the Pentateuch where divine plurality and participatory governance is evident from a close reading of the text.

## ***I. Divine Council: General Indications of Divine Plurality***

### **A. Familiar**

Talk of divine plurality in the Pentateuch immediately draws attention to those instances where God as speaker uses plural language in direct speech: Gen 1:26 ("let us make humankind in our image"), Gen 3:22 ("behold, the man / humankind has become like one of us"), and Gen 11:7 ("let us go down and there confuse their language"). Many scholars have discussed these forms, but none so thoroughly as W. Randall Garr in his 2003 Brill monograph, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism*. Garr devotes nearly eighty pages to detailed analysis of the morphology, syntax, semantics, form-critical elements, and linguist pragmatics of these three passages. Garr's work shows the inadequacies of considering the plurality language as presumed instances of the plural of solidarity, self-deliberation, self-exhortation, and the plural of majesty. Garr (rightly, in my mind as well) regards these options as "interpretive sleight of hand."<sup>5</sup> The plural of majesty (or "honor", "respect", "excellence") is

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<sup>5</sup> W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Brill, 2003), 18

especially vulnerable, as this semantic option pertains only to nouns. In discussing this issue, Garr writes, “There are no certain attestations of the majestic plural in pronouns. The ‘royal we’ was not part of the vocabulary of kings or individual gods in the ancient Near East.”<sup>6</sup>

The plural of majesty is, as we know, frequently appealed to in evangelical circles as a misguided means for offering a Trinitarian explanation for the plurality. Obviously there is nothing in the passage to limit the plurality to three. The literary parallels to certain Mesopotamian scenes such as Atrahasis, where the Anunnaki echo their approval in chorus as Nintu mixed clay with his flesh and blood to create humanity certainly doesn’t favor a Trinitarian approach. But the most severe problem is theological. Given that all three members of the Trinity are co-eternal and co-omniscient, it makes little sense to announce something to them. They should already know what’s going on.

Not surprisingly, then, Garr concludes that the plurality language of Gen 1:26 “should therefore be regarded as a divine announcement to the heavenly court.” But he is not content with basing that conclusion on the weaknesses of the alternatives. Instead—and this is Garr’s contribution in his monograph—he marshals a different linguistically-based argument in favor of his conclusion.

The majority of Garr’s treatment of the plurality language in these three passages surprisingly focuses on an analysis of the imperative **הִבְרֵה** in Gen 11:3-4, precursor to its occurrence in Gen 11:7. Most databases label the form as 2sg, but Garr believes it should be translated in a plural manner. Some of his observations include:

1. The form is accented differently when it governs an expressed object vs. when it does not.
2. When the form occurs asyndetically with a finite verb form, the two forms “together comprise a single discourse entity.”<sup>7</sup>
3. When the form’s contextual addressees are masculine plural, the form never appears in the expected plural morphology.
4. The form, when matching the preceding parameters, is restricted to direct speech. It is, in Garr’s terms, “a purely interactional, pragmatic particle. . . . [It is] a suasive particle. . . . [T]hat encourages interpersonal communication.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26, 28, 37.

5. The form always co-occurs with a first person pronoun. With the exception of Gen 38:16, the pronouns are plural.

Garr's point is ultimately to prove that Gen 11:7 cannot be understood by any of the time-honored "interpretive sleight of hand" methods that try to steer interpretation toward a single deity talking to Himself or engaging in self-reflection. He notes the cohortative form in Gen 11:7 (נִרְדָּה) that follows הִבָּה asyndetically and moves back to the cohortative of Gen 1:26 to defend a plurality argument.

With Garr (and many others, of course), I'd agree that Gen 1:26 and Gen 11:7 are God speaking to members of the divine council, the heavenly host. God is announcing his intentions to persuasively elicit a positive response. When it comes to the creation act (Gen 1:27) and the dispersion at Babel (Gen 11:8, 9), the grammar is equally clear that only God is actor—the verb forms and pronouns switch back to singular. So what's the point of the plural-singular juxtaposition? It shows that, somehow, humanity, God, and the members of the heavenly host/divine council are linked. We share something. That something is explained by the concept of imaging God (the image is a status, not a quality, given to humans; we image God on earth like the members of the council image him in the spiritual world—we are all representatives of the single Creator). That is the answer that derives from taking the preposition in בְּצֶלֶם as the *beth essentiae* (aka, the *beth of predication*). There are many reasons this is the best understanding of the phrase, both within and external to the biblical text, but I can't digress.

Genesis 3:22 differs from these other two instances in that the plurality is indicated by a prepositional phrase, not verb forms: "the man / humankind has become like one of us" (כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנִּי). The plurality is transparent due to the fact that this declaration plays off the earlier statement of the serpent that, if Eve eats, she will be "like 'elohim" (Gen 3:5). When that plays out, the humans are said to have become "like one of us," making the plurality of 'elohim evident. That the description of Eden conforms well to ancient Near Eastern imagery for the divine abode (which is, by definition, council headquarters) reinforces this plurality.

Other fairly clear instances of divine council presence would be Gen 28:12 and Gen 32:2, both of which contain the same phrase מַלְאכֵי אֱלֹהִים. In the former instance the "angels of God" are ascending and descending on the *sullam*. Following the work of Walton, Millard, and many others, I take the *sullam* as a ziggurat stairway and, thus, as part of a temple complex, the place where heaven meets earth. Temples were, of course, divine dwellings, and deity residences

often doubled as the headquarters for council business. Instead of describing the stairway as the place where heaven meets earth, viewing it as the place where the business of the unseen world intersects with the human world might be more appopriate. The latter instance of מְלֶאכִי has Jacob meeting “angels of God” and considering the location the “camp of God.” The sense is consistent. Where God’s entourage is, so is his dwelling. The angels of God engage Jacob because that’s their task at the time. They’re not on vacation (“hey, look who we ran into!”); they’ve been *sent*.

## B. Less Familiar

We’ll focus here on Deut 33:2-4 which, as most in this room will know, is textually problematic.

MT (JPS Tanakh with my insertions)	Septuagint (Göttingen, NETS)
<p>2 ... יְהוָה מִסִּינַי בָּא וְזָרַח מִשְׁעִיר  לְמוֹ הוֹפִיעַ מִהַר פָּאֵרָן וְאַתָּה  מִרְבֶּבֶת קֹדֶשׁ מִימִינוֹ אֲשַׁדֶּת לְמוֹ:  3 אַף חֲבִיב עַמִּים כָּל־קֹדְשֵׁיו בִּידֶךָ  וְהֵם תָּכֹן לְרִגְלֶךָ יֵשׁא מִדְּבַרְתֶּיךָ:  4 תוֹרָה צִוְּה־לָּנוּ מֹשֶׁה מוֹרְשֵׁה  קְהֵלֶת יַעֲקֹב:</p>	<p>... Κύριος ἐκ Σινὰ ἦκει,  καὶ ἐπέφανεν ἐκ Σηὶρ ἡμῖν  καὶ κατέσπευσεν ἐξ ὄρους Φαράν σὺν  μυριάσιν Καδῆς,  ἐκ δεξιῶν αὐτοῦ ἄγγελοι μετ’ αὐτοῦ.  <sup>3</sup> καὶ ἐφείσατο τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ,  καὶ πάντες οἱ ἡγιασμένοι ὑπὸ τὰς  χεῖράς σου·  καὶ οὗτοι ὑπὸ σέ εἰσιν,  καὶ ἐδέξατο ἀπὸ τῶν λόγων αὐτοῦ  <sup>4</sup> νόμον, ὃν ἐνετείλατο ἡμῖν Μωϋσῆς,  κληρονομίαν συναγωγαῖς Ἰακώβ.</p>
<p><sup>2</sup> ... The LORD came from Sinai;  He shone upon them from Seir;  He appeared from Mount Paran,  And <b>approached from Ribebboth-kodesh,</b>  <b>Lightning flashing (variant: “a fiery law”)</b> at them from  <b>His right.</b>  <sup>3</sup> Lover, indeed, <b>of the people,</b>  <b>Their hallowed (“all his holy ones”)</b> are all in Your  <b>hand.</b>  They followed in Your steps,  Accepting Your pronouncements,  <sup>4</sup> When Moses charged us with the Teaching  As the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> ... The Lord has come from Sina  And appeared to us at Seir  And hasted from Mount Pharan  With myriads of Kades;  <b>At his right, angels with him.</b>  <sup>3</sup> And he spared <b>his people,</b>  <b>And all of the sanctified ones were under your</b>  <b>hands—even those under you,</b>  And it (NETS footnote: “the people”) accepted from  his words <sup>4</sup> a law,  Which Moyses commanded us,  And inheritance for the congregations of Iakob.</p>

In verse two of MT, some translations have “myriads of holy ones.” However, the Hebrew phrase underlying “Ribebboth-Kodesh” is very close to what occurs at Deut. 32:51 (“Meribath Kadesh”). Consequently, most scholars today consider the phrase to be a geographical place name. That’s quite reasonable. In verse 3 MT seems to equate “the people” with “all his holy ones” (this is especially the case in the JPS translation: “of the people, their hallowed ones”). Yahweh’s people, his holy people, are under his authority (“under your hand”). They follow at the LORD’s feet and receive the Law. The result is that, in MT, there are no angels in the scene. The closest one gets to that idea is Psa 68:17, which clearly has the host of heaven at Sinai and alludes to the mountain as God’s sanctuary. But that passage has no reference to the law. The Septuagint is noticeably different. The reader is given the impression that “his people” and “all the holy ones” are *different groups*. In the Septuagint, God pities his people while his holy ones—the angels referred to in the previous verse—accept from God a law, which turns out to be the law Moses in turn gave to Israel.

I bring this passage up because many commentators feel that it is relevant to the New Testament tradition that the Law was delivered by angels (Acts 7:52; Heb 2:1-2; Gal 3:19). I’d agree. Obviously, that tradition had to come from somewhere. Paul’s comment in Gal 3:19 about an “intermediary” present with the angels when the law was given—an intermediary that didn’t impinge upon God’s oneness—provides a convenient segue to our next section.

## **II. The Divine Council: Hints of Binitarianism and a Co-Regency Structure**

### **A. Two Yahweh Figures in the Torah**

Paul is obviously tracking on something in Gal 3:19 when he writes:

<sup>19</sup> Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. <sup>20</sup> Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

The note on the plural transgressions is beyond the scope of the present paper. We’ll need to focus on the law being “put in place through angels.” Paul seems to sense that this idea might cause concern for some, and so he adds the thought that there was an intermediary. He then in turn seems to sense that some readers might take this intermediary as a threat to the oneness or uniqueness of Yahweh (“the Lord our God is one” after all).

Most scholars assume this is a reference to Moses. By why would the thought of Moses being the intermediary prompt Paul to assure his readers that “the Lord our God was (still) one”?



There is another solution, one that explains Paul's anticipated concern and his response that such a concern wasn't necessary: The intermediary is Yahweh in human form.

As we'll see in a moment, anthropomorphic language is an important feature of Israel's divine council ruling structure. Deuteronomy 33, our passage about angels being present at the giving of the law, uses anthropomorphic language requiring the appearance of Yahweh in human form ("appeared"; "his right"). In this light, Deuteronomy 9:9–10 takes on new significance. Moses says:

<sup>9</sup> When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that Yahweh made with you, and remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights, I did not eat food and I did not drink water. <sup>10</sup> And Yahweh gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them was writing according to all the words that Yahweh spoke with you at the mountain, from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.

(Notice how Yahweh refers to the finger of God in the third person; this is known in literary terms as *illeism*; I'll say something about that in a moment).

The anthropomorphic language and the reference to the incident at the burning bush take our thoughts immediately to the Angel of Yahweh (מַלְאֲךְ יְהוָה). This was one of the key figures in Judaism's two powers doctrine (the other being the son of man – the human one – of Daniel 7). This is, as I argued in my dissertation and in *Unseen Realm*, a second Yahweh figure, the visible Yahweh.

Some will, of course, say that we can't really think of this Angel as Yahweh. I disagree for a number of reasons, but I'll isolate them to two here: the fact that the Name of Yahweh is in this Angel (Exod 23:20-23), and the tight grammatical identification of Yahweh and the Angel in Gen 48:15-16. I'm in the camp that recognizes a Name theology – that the Name meant more than an expression of ownership, but included the notion of the actual divine presence. My recent BBR article can give you the specifics of why. Suffice to say here that I think the criticisms of the scholarship that seeks to argue against this sort of Name theology levied by Wilson, Wenham, Hundley (and others) are telling. Hundley's *Vetus Testamentum* article in particular gets interested readers up to date on the issue.

To get to some specifics, that the Name was in the particular Angel of Exod 23:20-23 doesn't mean Yahweh owned the Angel. He was the Angel, and the Angel was him. This is why, in answer to the question, "Who delivered the Israelites from Egypt and brought them to

Canaan?” various verses have the answer being Yahweh (Deut 4:20; 6:21), El (Num 23:22; 24:8), Elohim (Exod 13:17-18; 2 Sam 7:23; Neh 9:18), the Panim (Deut 4:37), and the Angel (Judg 2:1-3; Num 20:16). They were all ways of referring to the same deity. The Angel belongs in the list because the Name was in him.

Some will also suggest that the Angel only looks like Yahweh because of the cultural ideology of messengers and servants being representatives of their superior. That of course can't speak to the nature of the representative any more than Jesus's status as being given God's name (John 17) or being Yahweh's servant makes us question the deity of Jesus. If the biblical writer wanted to make sure the separation between the two figures must not be blurred, then he bungled the task in Gen 48:15-16. In those two verses Jacob invokes two figures in three stanzas of his prayer over Joseph's children:

“The God [האלהים] before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked,

The God [האלהים] who shepherded me all my life unto this day,

<sup>16</sup> The angel [המלאך] who redeemed me from all evil,

may he bless (יְבָרֵךְ) the boys.

Two morphological features stand out here: the presence of the definite article on מלאך and the singular Piel jussive form: יְבָרֵךְ. This isn't use of the first person language by the Angel for proper cultural protocol. It also isn't literary illeism (though to be fair the work done by evangelical scholars in that regard doesn't argue illeism is contrary to a Godhead conception in the Hebrew Bible). Rather, this is Jacob's testimony putting the two figures on the same level. Had the writer or an editor wanted to make sure the two figures were disambiguated to avoid a violation of the *Shema* or some such concern, a simple plural form would have done the trick. But he didn't care to do so. There was no theological conundrum, given the other places in the Torah where a distinction is blurred.

To take this a bit farther, a syntactical search for a clause whose subject is compound with morphologically singular predication, where the first two subject constituents are a noun of deity (e.g., a name of God), leaving the third subject constituent semantically undefined, yields a handful of instances:

Gen 48:15-16

15	וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלַּכְוּ אֲבֹתַי לִפְנֵי אַבְרָהָם וַיִּצְחָק הָאֱלֹהִים הָרַעְהָ אֹתִי מֵעוֹדִי עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:
16	הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֹל אֹתִי מִכָּל־רָע <b>יְבָרֶךְ</b> אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בְהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתִי אַבְרָהָם וַיִּצְחָק וַיִּדְגּוּ לָרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ:
<p><sup>15</sup> And he blessed Joseph and said, “The <u>God</u> before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the <u>God</u> who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, <sup>16</sup> the <u>angel</u> who has redeemed me from all evil, <b>ble</b>ss the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”</p>	

Gen 31:42

42	לֹאִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם וּפָחַד יִצְחָק <b>הִיא לִי</b> כִּי עָתָה רִיקָם שְׁלַחְתָּנִי אֶת־עַנְיִי וְאֶת־יָגִיעַ כַּפֵּי רַאֲהָ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּזְכַּח אֹמֶשׁ:
<p><sup>42</sup> If the <u>God</u> of my father, the <u>God</u> of Abraham and the <u>Fear of Isaac</u>, <b>had not been on my side</b>, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.”</p>	

Exod 34:6

6	וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה   עַל־פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה   יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־ חֶסֶד וָאֱמֶת:
7	<b>נִצָּר</b> חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים <b>נִשָּׂא</b> עוֹן וּפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה <b>פִּקֵּד</b>   עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְעַל־בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים:
<p><sup>6</sup> The <u>LORD</u> passed before him and proclaimed, “The <u>LORD</u>, the <u>LORD</u>, a <u>God</u> merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> <b>keeping</b> steadfast love for thousands, <b>forgiving</b> iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, <b>visiting</b> the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”</p>	

A slightly different clause structure (verbless clauses) yields a fourth:

Psa 68:20-21 (English: vv. 19-20)

20	בִּירוֹךְ אֲדֹנָי יְיָ   יוֹם יַעֲמֹס־לָנוּ הָאֵל יִשׁוּעָתָנוּ סִלָּה:
21	הָאֵל   לָנוּ אֵל לְמוֹשָׁעוֹת וְלִיהוָה אֲדֹנָי לְמוֹת תּוֹצְאוֹת:

<p><sup>19</sup> Blessed be the Lord,     who daily bears us up;     <u>God</u> is our salvation. <i>Selah</i> <sup>20</sup> Our <u>God</u> is a <u>God</u> of salvation,     and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.</p>
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What's interesting is that each instance doesn't allow for the third constituent to be a figure distinct from the first two (which happen to point to the same entity) – unless someone wants to adopt a polytheistic reading in Gen 31:42 which is problematic since Jacob identifies the Fear of Isaac with the God of his fathers a few verses later (31:53). Why consider Gen 48:15-16 different from the other instances? Why say the Angel isn't Yahweh? I don't see any coherent reason to single this passage out for denying an equation.

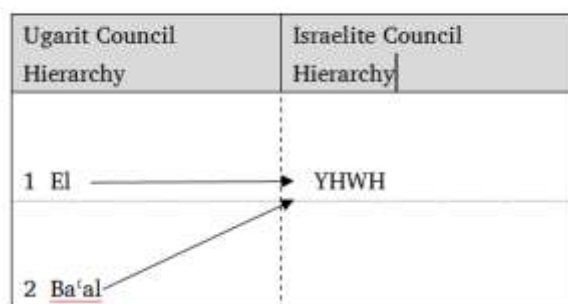
## **B. Co-regency of the Two Yahweh Figures in Israel's Divine Council**

I believe there's a strategic theological reason for the two Yahweh figures: it amounts to a co-regent governance structure in Israel's divine council.

I discussed this co-regency structure at length in a recent BBR article, the contents of which were in large part drawn from my dissertation. That article sought to demonstrate that the roots of Second Temple Judaism's two powers in heaven theology were to be found an ancient Israelite co-regency notion that was part of the way biblical writers adapted the co-regent structure of the divine council of Ugarit into a system where Yahweh occupied both offices involved in council rule. That article in part explained the idea this way:

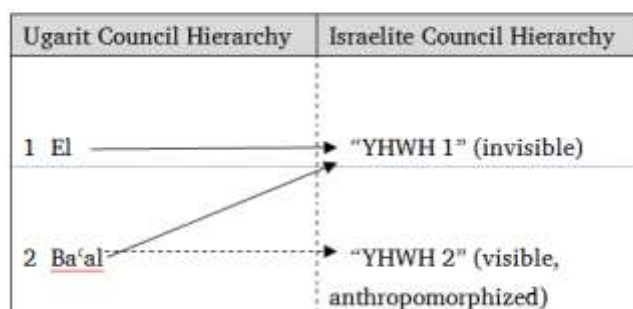
The divine council of Ugarit featured a co-regency involving a high sovereign deity (El) who ruled heaven and earth through the agency of a second, appointed co-regent deity (Ba'al). The co-regent Ba'al, referred to as "king of the gods" outranked the other deities in council, including the "sons of El" and divine messengers (*ml'km*). Scholars working in both the Ugaritic corpus and the Hebrew Bible have demonstrated that the biblical writers drew upon El and Ba'al epithets and motifs when describing YHWH. The strategy of identifying YHWH with these two major rival deities reinforced the agenda of monotheism (Illustration 1).

Illustration 1:



Another strategic use of Ba'al epithets and imagery has gone largely unnoticed. Not only did Israelite religion attribute the status and powers of El and Ba'al to YHWH, but while doing so it adapted Ugarit's co-regent structure to its own conception of monotheistic sovereignty. This co-regent structure is reflected by the assignment of Ba'al epithets and imagery to a *second* figure that is simultaneously identified with, but distinguished from, YHWH. The second YHWH figure is visibly portrayed in human form and serves the invisible, sovereign YHWH. The end result was a binitarian or ditheistic portrayal of YHWH as both high sovereign (the "El role") and the co-regent (the "Ba'al role"; Illustration 2). This framework therefore followed the Canaanite co-regent structure but did not violate Yahwistic monotheism, since both roles were fulfilled by YHWH.

Illustration 2



I shouldn't have to remind this audience that Ba'al was no quasi-divine figure in the Israelite mind. He was a deity, and to align a second Yahweh figure with him was to convey deity status to that second figure. In an effort to present this idea, the BBR article outlined the co-regency structure of Ugarit, paying particular attention to certain aspects of the role of Ba'al, the co-

regent, and then put forth the evidence for how portrayals of the מלאך יהוה align with epithets, activities and portrayals of Ba'al the co-regent.

The literary anthropomorphizing of Yahweh is crucial with respect to this alignment. That phenomenon in turn takes us back to the controversial subject of the name theology. Again, my most recent BBR article provides my reasons for why I've thrown my lot in with those scholars—evangelical and otherwise—who reject this skepticism and affirm that biblical Name theology goes beyond the assertion of ownership. To cite one such example, Benjamin Sommer, in his important work, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, bluntly writes: “[They] collect copious and convincing examples of God’s embodied nature, only to deny the corporeality of the biblical God on the basis of an unsupported assertion that the biblical authors didn’t really mean it at all.”<sup>9</sup> The Name theology is part of the matrix of anthropomorphizing God and there’s no compelling reason to deny that.

In perhaps simpler terms, my argument for two-Yahweh co-regency goes like this: When passages like Gen 48:15-16 and Exod 23:20-23 are considered together, the מלאך יהוה is put forth as the anthropomorphized Yahweh—while not displacing the transcendent invisible Yahweh in heaven.<sup>10</sup> When we read passages involving this particular Angel, the alignments with El’s co-regent, Ba'al, are striking. When one in turn realizes that the מלאך יהוה isn’t described in “El terms” like the transcendent sovereign Yahweh but is aligned identified with Ba'al motifs, and yet Yahweh the distinction between Yahweh and the Angel is at times blurred, one is left with a two-Yahweh system because the Angel and Yahweh, while sharing deity epithets of Ba'al are also distinguished from each other. The result is that Israel’s two Yahweh council structure is juxtaposed against the council of Canaan/Ugarit. The divine council structure itself then becomes something of a polemic against its polytheistic rival.

In my recent BBR article, I discussed some specific points of alignment:

1. **Ba'al’s status as “lord of the earth (’arš)”**. As scholars of Ugaritic and Canaanite religion have noted, this title should not be restricted to lordship of the Underworld.

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin D. Sommer, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 8.

<sup>10</sup> There have been a number of studies on anthropomorphic portrayals of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible: Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990); Esther J. Hamori, “When Gods Were Men”: *The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (BZAW 384; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Benjamin D. Sommer, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Stephen L. Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (FRLANT 247; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2013).

Wyatt has argued that the epithet “appears to indicate that the conflict between Ba‘al and Yamm is concerned with lordship of the earth.”<sup>11</sup> Pardee agrees, noting that that, “Ba‘lu was somehow seen as the king of the earth in the context of divine contact with the earth at Mount Šapānu.”<sup>12</sup>

2. **Ba‘al’s portrayal as a victorious warrior.** This portrayal of Ba‘al is well known. The co-regent of Ugarit’s council is called “victorious Ba‘al”; “Ba‘al the mighty one”; “the mightiest of heroes”; “annihilator Haddu”. The most explicit depiction is Ba‘al’s victory procession described in *KTU* 1.4.vii.7-13. The passage affirms Ba‘al as the victorious warrior, as well as his earlier status as ruler of the nations. Smith and Pitard note on this passage:

This section describes Baal’s victory march through the towns and villages of his domain. . . . This passage appears to make use of the imagery of the divine warrior’s campaign against his enemies (cf. similar imagery in Deut 33:2, Judg 5:4–5 and Ps 68:8–9, 18–19) . . . . However, Baal’s procession does not seem to be a true military campaign, since there is no real indication of resistance by the towns. It rather seems to be a victory tour in which all the cities and towns demonstrate their submission to the conqueror. . . . [T]he poet makes use of a traditional numerical formula . . . clearly intended not to be taken literally, but . . . intended to suggest that Baal’s conquests go beyond any conventional numerical scale; *he is king over all the earth*.<sup>13</sup>

3. **Ba‘al’s enthronement in his house-temple.** Following the declaration of Ba‘al’s victory over Yamm in *KTU* 1.4.iv.43-45, the matter of a house-temple for Ba‘alu comes into focus. Ba‘alu has become co-regent over Yamm. He is ruler of the earth. It is fitting that he have a house-temple. Ba‘al presents offerings in his house (*KTU* 1.4.vi.39-41), serves food and drink to at his house-warming party (*KTU* 1.4.vi.44-58), and “settles” into his new home (*KTU* 1.4.vii.13-14). Smith points out that the house-temple material in the Baal Cycle contains a “constellation of temple themes. . . . Baal’s heavenly palace

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<sup>11</sup> N. Wyatt, “Titles of the Ugaritic Storm God,” *UF* 24 (1992): 416.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis Pardee, “The Ba‘lu Myth,” in *The Context of Scripture* (William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds.; Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997) 269-70, n. 250.

<sup>13</sup> Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle Volume II: Introduction With Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3-1.4* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009) 660-62.

consists of gold and precious stone (specifically, lapis lazuli, the stone associated with the heavenly palace in Exod 24:9-11).”<sup>14</sup>

Exodus 24:9-11 is a convenient passage for unraveling how the Ba‘al co-regent portrayals map over to the Angel of Yahweh—the anthropomorphized Yahweh figure who is the co-regent counterpart in Israel’s council authority.

Exodus 24:9-11 is of course the scene where the anthropomorphized Yahweh serves a meal to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders on Sinai—the same mountain where the anthropomorphized Yahweh (the Angel) had met Moses before in the burning bush. Sinai is, as biblical theologians have demonstrated again and again, Yahweh’s home where he is worshipped: his house-temple. The anthropomorphized Yahweh, having defeated his divine rivals, is enthroned in/on his house-temple (Sinai).

The burning bush account is, as we all know, the counterpart to Joshua 5:13-15, where the language used by the commander of Yahweh’s host links that figure to the burning bush. The description in Josh 5:13 (“a man was standing before him **with his drawn sword in his hand**”; חֶרְבּוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ) is noteworthy, as the phrase occurs only two other places (Num 22:23; 1 Chron 21:16). In both instances the figure so described is the Angel of Yahweh. Acts 7:30 is of course consistent with all this, as it regards the angel in the bush as a visual event (Stephen says an angel “appeared” to Moses). The commander of Yahweh’s host is easily identifiable as the divine warrior—and hence the victorious Ba‘al counterpart. Indeed, as Segal noted decades ago, the rabbinical defense of a second power in heaven often focused on the victorious divine warrior since Exod 15:3 reads “YHWH is a man of war.” The rabbis were here focused on the anthropomorphized Yahweh of the Torah text, not deciding on their own to bring Yahweh down from heaven and make him a man.

The house-temple of Yahweh would, of course, change location when the Name took up residence in Zion. This too plays into the co-regent council structuring. As I wrote in my BBR article:

“Recall that, after warrior Ba‘al won the co-regency, the Ba‘al Cycle records his victory march through a number of towns and villages of his domain. As noted earlier, Smith and Pitard draw attention to several important items in this description, namely, that it bore resemblance to the imagery of biblical passages describing YHWH’s march to Zion

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<sup>14</sup> Mark S. Smith, “Like Deities, Like Temples (Like People),” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (ed. John Day; London: T & T Clark / Continuum, 2007) 9.



(Deut 33:2, Judg 5:4–5 and Ps 68:8–9, 18–19).<sup>15</sup> It is appropriate at this juncture to expand upon the earlier quotation, for their point is important for the imagery of the Israelite divine co-regency.

There's no need to repeat the Smith and Pitard quotation here. We need only observe that:

“[T]he victory march and the belief in terrestrial sovereignty are also united in Israelite religion with respect to the anthropomorphized co-regent YHWH. Each of the biblical passages referenced by Smith and Pitard describes the divine warrior's march in anthropomorphic terms. Since the usual referent when YHWH is described in human form is the angel who is YHWH on earth, these divine processions could have been processed by some Second Temple interpreters as depictions of the warrior angel leading Israel to Zion.

## **Conclusion**

So where does this leave us? For this audience, I'd say that, when it comes to the Pentateuch—and more broadly, a text-driven theology—the divine council is an example of why we ought to enthusiastically embrace the comparative enterprise. Yes, evangelicals do that, but they have often fail to do it in terms of Canaanite and other ANE religions. That has theological implications, after all. Avoiding religious connections is a dishonest strategy. If we're going to be serious (and not duplicitous) about interpreting Scripture in its original context (the context in which this thing we say is inspired was produced), we must go beyond comfortable connections like cultural customs and cooking utensils. We have nothing to fear. It was God's choice to speak through people at the particular time, place, and context in which he did, and we don't need to protect our students—or the larger flock—from the results of his decisions. We don't know better than God.

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<sup>15</sup> Smith and Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle Volume II*, 660-62.