

# Does Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible Demonstrate an Evolution From Polytheism to Monotheism in Israelite Religion?

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## o. Introduction

The title of this essay raises a question that is quite current, though the question it raises might sound strange to evangelicals who specialize in fields other than the ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible. The present currency of the question derives not only from 19<sup>th</sup> century critical scholarship that many evangelicals consider methodologically suspect, but from the text of the Hebrew Bible and archaeological discoveries in ancient Syria and Canaan. The focus of this contribution is on the former. Certain sets of assumptions brought to the biblical text that contribute significantly to manufacturing interpretive problems that allegedly compel the idea that Israelite religious evolved toward monotheism. The first set of assumptions concerns the phenomenon of divine plurality in the Hebrew text; the second involves an argument for divine plurality that is imported into the text. I'll address both in order.

### 1.o. Divine Plurality in the Text of the Hebrew Bible

#### 1.1. Summary of the Problem

Scholars of the Hebrew Bible know that there are a number of instances where **אלהים** is accurately translated by the plural ("gods") and where such translations are used of an Israelite divine assembly or council under the authority of Yahweh (Psa 82:1). Other terms like **אלים** ("gods") and **בני (ה) אלהים** / **עליון / אלים** also occur in the Hebrew Bible, several of which are used in the context of a heavenly divine council.<sup>1</sup>

Since the concept of a divine council is witnessed throughout the ancient Near East among polytheistic religions, it is assumed that a divine council of plural **אלהים** in the Hebrew Bible is evidence of antiquated polytheism in Israel's religion. Historical circumstances, we are told, eventually propelled a theological change in the mind of Israel's religious elite. The divine council disappeared as Israelite religion achieved the breakthrough to monotheism. To cope with the reality of exile, Israel's religious leadership came to believe Yahweh was intrinsically superior to other gods. Yahweh had used the other nations and their gods to punish Israel. Hence the biblical writers cast Yahweh as the sovereign of all nations who sentenced the

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<sup>1</sup> See Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *ZAW* 76 (1964): 22-47; Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Eisenbrauns, 1994); M. S. Heiser, "Divine Council," *DOTWPW*: 112-116; J. Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 14 (1939): 29-126; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980); idem, "Assembly, Divine," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:214-217; W. S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 82: Once Again, Gods or Men?" *Biblica* 76:2 (1995): 219-28; Matitiahu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," *HUCA* 40-41 (1969-1970): 123-137.

gods of the nations to death (Psalm 82). Yahweh thus emerged from the exile as the lone God; no others existed. An alleged editorial agenda driven by monotheistic zealot-priests and scribes during and after the exile enforced and assured this religious transition via their work on the final redaction of the Hebrew Bible. This new monotheism went beyond monolatry, which allows the existence of other gods but forbids their worship. It is reflected in denial language where the writers have Yahweh proclaim, "There is no god besides me," interpreted as meaning Yahweh is the only god that exists. Prior to this evolutionary leap, such statements must be hyperbole, since such language is known in the religious literature of other cultures, such as polytheistic Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

One could ask several questions at this juncture: What is the linguistic justification that denial statements in pre-exilic texts must surely be hyperbole, while the same phrases deny the existence of other gods after the exile? Is it really coherent to say that a pre-exilic Israelite did not truly believe Yahweh was unique and that any language suggesting as much was a deliberate exaggeration? Is not an appeal to hyperbole to superimpose a modern skeptical dismissal on an ancient Semite? Why are some of the clearest examples of a divine council of **בני אלהים** found in texts that are dated to the exile by most scholars (e.g., Job 1-2)? Did it really never occur to Israelites before the exile that Yahweh had command over all nations and their gods? If that presumption is true, why is Yahweh's kingship over the nations found in pre-exilic texts? How could early biblical writers presume that Yahweh could deliver foreign nations to Israel? If the idea that no other gods existed emerged only in the exile, why are there 200 references to plural **אלהים / אלים** in the Qumran sectarian literature, many of them in the context of a divine council?<sup>3</sup> Were the Jews of Qumran not monotheists?

It is the view of this writer that the consensus reconstruction of an evolution toward monotheism is not compelled by the presence of a divine council of **אלהים** in the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, the consensus view lacks coherence.

### 1.2. *The Meaning of Elohim for the Biblical Writers*

The proposition put forth here is that biblical writers understood the word **אלהים** in a way that never created the tensions that motivate the consensus view that what we commonly consider the orthodox monotheism of the biblical writers was the climax of a religious evolution. We are confronted with two phenomena in the Hebrew Bible that propel this misunderstanding. First, the Hebrew Bible does in fact

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<sup>2</sup> This reconstruction is aimed at reflecting the general consensus. There are variations of this broad perspective. See for example: Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel* (JSOTSup 241; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 129-296; Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 149-194; idem., *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 124-158; S. B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God – Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995): 532-559.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael S. Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 183-224. For a more recent treatment, see Michael S. Heiser, "Divine Plurality in the Dead Sea Scrolls" (paper presented at the regional meeting of the Pacific Northwest Region of the SBL, Spokane, WA, 13 May 2011). This paper is accessible at [www.thedivinecouncil.com/DSSelohim.pdf](http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/DSSelohim.pdf).

witness to plural אֱלֹהִים.<sup>4</sup> Second, the existence of those plural אֱלֹהִים was assumed by the biblical writers and even embraced as part of their theology.

Psalm 82:1 is the parade example for both phenomena:

אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדֹת־אֱלֹ בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט:

God (אֱלֹהִים) stands in the divine assembly;

in the midst of the gods (אֱלֹהִים) he passes judgment.

But how could the biblical writer tolerate the existence of multiple אֱלֹהִים and yet write denial statements in other passages? Some scholars seek to argue that the multiple אֱלֹהִים of Ps 82:1b are humans, but this approach suffers from numerous difficulties.<sup>5</sup> The issue and any related interpretive consternation are resolved by letting the biblical writers inform us as to how they understood אֱלֹהִים by virtue of its usage elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

There are six figures or entities referred to as אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible:

- A. Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 2000 times)
- B. The אֱלֹהִים of Yahweh's heavenly council (Psa 82; Psa 89; cf. Deut 32:8-9, 43 [with LXX, Qumran<sup>6</sup>])
- C. The gods of foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33)
- D. "Demons" (שְׁדִים; Deut 32:17)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Exod 15:11; Deut 32:17; Pss 29:1; 82:1; 86:8; 89:5-7 [Heb: vv. 6-8]; 95:3; 96:4; 97:7, 9; 136.2; 138:1. Psalm 58:11 should likewise be included. For text-critical reasons, as well as literary parallelism, MT consonantal אֱלֹם in Ps 58:11 should be vocalized אֱלֹם or emended to אֱלִים. See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 2002) 82; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100* (AB 16; New York: Doubleday, 1968) 57.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the problems, see Michael S. Heiser, "What is / are (an) Elohim?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, GA, 17 November 2010). This paper is accessible at [www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETS2010elohim.pdf](http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETS2010elohim.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut 32:8, which reads בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ("sons of Israel"). See for example, P. W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; idem, "Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text," *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, "A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt<sup>b</sup>, 4QDt<sup>c</sup>, 4QDt<sup>d</sup>, 4QDt<sup>e</sup>, 4QDt<sup>f</sup>, 4QDt<sup>g</sup>, 4QDt<sup>h</sup>," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75-79; Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518.

<sup>7</sup> There are perhaps no more perplexing translation choices as those one will find for Deut 32:17. Regarding Deut 32:17, English translations reflect disagreement over primarily two issues: whether to render אֱלֹהֵי as singular or plural and how

- E. The disembodied human dead (1 Sam 28:13)
- F. The Angel of Yahweh (Gen 35:7<sup>8</sup>)

This listing alone should inform biblical scholars of something critical to the discussion, but which seems to have gone unnoticed. The fact that the biblical writers could use אלהים of more than one entity or figure—all of which are elsewhere described in far lesser terms than Yahweh—tells us clearly that they did not exclusively associate the term אלהים with a set of unique attributes. For moderns that assumption is reflexive; the word “g-o-d” immediately takes the mind to the singular Being conceived of as the God of the Bible. Consequently, the mention of other אלהים conjures unease for the modern interpreter no matter how clear the biblical text is in regard to this variegated usage. However, the biblical writer did not think about אלהים the way moderns think of “g-o-d.” It would have been absurd to the biblical writer to suggest that a dear, departed relative, now an אלהים in Sheol like Samuel, was on an ontological par with Yahweh and the אלהים of His council. But any argument that insists that toleration of plural אלהים evinces polytheism assumes this logic. If one assumes the biblical writer had a specific set of attributes in mind when describing an entity with the word אלהים, then there is no escape from this point of incoherence. And if one retreats to the argument that אלהים differed their attributes, then the term אלהים can no longer be associated with a consistent set of attributes. As such, the term can no longer be a proof for polytheism; that worldview would have to be argued on some other basis. This would in turn rob the consensus view of its argument, that passages describing plural אלהים demonstrate polytheism.

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to translate the verbless clause in which it appears לֹא אֱלֹהִים. The first issue that needs to be addressed is whether אֱלֹהִים is more accurately translated as a singular or plural. The word אֱלֹהִים is a defective spelling of the lemma אֱלֹהִים. A computer search of the Hebrew Bible (BHS) reveals that the lemma אֱלֹהִים occurs 58 times. There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where אֱלֹהִים is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun. The only place where such an option might appear to be workable is 2 Kgs 17:31, where the text informs us that “the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (אֱלֹהֵי סַפְרַיִם).” The pointing here suggests that the lemma is not אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהִים in a misspelled or archaic plural construct form. That the Qere reading for this form is אֱלֹהִים argues forcefully that the lemma is not אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהִים. Lexicography therefore offers no support for a plural translation. For a treatment of the verbless clause syntax, see M. Heiser, “Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?” *Bible Translator* 59:3 (July 2008): 137-145.

<sup>8</sup> This last identification is uncertain. The plural predication with האלהים as subject is very possibly designed to blur the distinction between God and the Angel of Yahweh (cp. Gen 48:15-16 and its dual subject with singular verb), who elsewhere appears in human form. See M. Heiser, “Should אלהים (’ēlōhîm) with Plural Predication Be Translated ‘Gods’?” *Bible Translator* 61:3 (July 2010): 123-136. Additionally, some scholars would presume that Gen 32:1-2 also identifies angels (מלאכים) as אלהים (e.g., Stephen Geller, “The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative,” *JANES* 14 [1982]: 54).

The most straightforward way to understand the biblical use of אלהים is to divorce it from attribute ontology. אלהים is more coherently understood as a “place of residence” term. The word does not label its referent with a specific set of attributes; it identifies the proper reality domain of the referent. All אלהים are members of the unseen spiritual world, their place of residence. In that realm there is rank, hierarchy, and differentiation of attributes. Yahweh, one of the אלהים, was considered incomparable and unique in terms of his attributes. But that superiority was not conveyed the word אלהים. Other descriptions of Yahweh and other אלהים oblige that conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Succinctly, Yahweh is an אלהים, but no other אלהים is Yahweh. Yahweh was not one among equals; he was species unique. But all אלהים were members of the spiritual realm, the realm whose inhabitants are by nature disembodied. This was the theology of those who composed and edited the Hebrew Bible.

In view of the intellectual distance between the present time and the milieu of biblical Israel, the modern term “monotheism,” coined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as an antonym to “atheism,” is deficient for describing the beliefs of the ancient Israelites who produced the Hebrew Bible since it carries the baggage of identifying “g-o-d” with a single set of attributes held only by Yahweh. However, the intention behind the term—to affirm the existence and uniqueness God of Israel—reflects beliefs the biblical writer would have embraced.

This simple but profound shift in perspective undercuts most of the arguments upon which a presumed evolution toward monotheism is considered necessary. There is no need for orthodox Yahwism to have evolved anywhere. While archaeological material and the testimony of human experience convincingly demonstrate that human beings will invariably hold a wide range of conceptions about any deity presumed to exist, it is flawed thinking to presume that because some Israelites would have thought in polytheistic or henotheistic terms, where Yahweh was not unique in his attributes, that all Israelites, inclusive of the biblical writers, must have thought in such terms. This notion requires the incoherent assumption that the biblical usage of אלהים always telegraphed the same attribute ontology no matter the referent.

### 1.3. *The Meaning of the “Denial Statements” in the Hebrew Bible*

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<sup>9</sup> I have in mind here the claim that Yahweh was responsible for creating the host of heaven (Psa 33:6; 148:1-5), conceived of as divine beings in ancient Near Eastern cosmology; the notion that he commanded the heavenly host (1 Kings 22:19-23; the phrase יהוה צבאות, used many times in pre-exilic literature); and the use of האלהים and similar phrases for the supremacy of Yahweh as God. Several instances of these phrases occur in pre-exilic texts, an observation that will become noteworthy as this essay continues. For example: יהוה הוא האלהים (“Yahweh, he is *the* god [i.e., par excellence]; 1 Kings 8:60; 18:39); הוא האלהים (“He is *the* god”; 2 Sam 7:28); אתה האלהים (“You are *the* god”; Isa 37:16); יהוה האלהים (“Yahweh is *the* god”; Josh 22:34).

If the above understanding of is intelligible, what do we make of the various statements on the part of the biblical writers that there was “no god besides” Yahweh? What follows is a brief summary of material this writer has put forth elsewhere regarding this question.<sup>10</sup>

The evolutionary consensus with respect to Israelite monotheism regularly proposes that passages in which plural **אלהים** or **בני אלהים** are found constitute proof of vestigial polytheism in the Hebrew Bible. One passage that is absolutely critical to the evolutionary view is Deut 32:8-9, where the Most High divides the nations and distributes them according to the number of the sons of God (with LXX, Qumran). This theology is echoed in Deut 4:19-20. Deuteronomy 32:17 adds the notion that lesser divine beings, the “demons” (**שדים**), are **אלהים**. That the “host of heaven” mentioned in Deut 4:19-20 are to be identified with the gods of Deut 32 is made clear by Deut 17:2-3, where God forbids the worship of the sun, moon, and host of heaven since they are “other gods” (**אלהים אחרים**). It is clear, then, to the consensus adherents, that these portions of Deuteronomy embrace the vestigial polytheism out of which Israel eventually was to evolve.

What is at times omitted from the discussion, however, is that both Deut 4 and 32 contain denial statements, declarations that the consensus argues reflect the climax of the monotheistic evolutionary trajectory:

Deuteronomy 4:35 – “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the* God (**הַאֱלֹהִים**); besides him there is no other (**אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבָדוֹ**).”

Deuteronomy 4:39 – “Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (**הַאֱלֹהִים**) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (**אֵין עוֹד**).”

Deuteronomy 32:29 – “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me (**וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי**); I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”

These sorts of denial statements constitute the heart of the idea that, by the time of Deutero-Isaiah, in whose material (Isa 40-55) such denials are frequently found, Israelite religion had dispensed with the belief that other **אלהים** existed. How, then, can these same statements appear in passages that, according to the consensus view, point readers to the older polytheistic worldview of Israel?

The juxtaposition of such denial statements alongside affirmations of many **אלהים** is typically dismissed as editorial predilection, where a late redactor who had reached the intellectual realization that only one God existed interjected these denials as a means to inform or remind those reading older biblical material

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<sup>10</sup> Heiser, “The Divine Council,” 90-121; Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *BBR* 18:1 (2008): 13-18.

that the only god was Yahweh. In effect, rather than change the text, a redactor would guide readers to the monotheistic conclusion by such insertions. This explanation fails, though, when one considers the fact that texts considered late in Israel's history, such as the book of Job, includes unambiguous divine council scenes (Job 1-2) without any accompanying monotheistic rhetorical "correction." It is also inconsistent with Second Temple texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls that have over two hundreds references to plural אלהים.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, some consensus scholars would object to the idea entirely, since they believe that during and after the exile a zealous scribal campaign was undertaken to remove polytheistic material from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup>

It is much more coherent to say that the biblical writers believed in the existence of many אלהים (that is, after all, how they use the term) but that the God of Israel was incomparable with respect to other אלהים.

That faith assertion would seem to be the clear point of the definite article prefixed to אלהים in both Deut 4:35, 39—Yahweh was *the* God, par excellence. The same pattern follows through Isaiah 40-66, the other section of the Hebrew Bible considered fertile territory for asserting that Israelite religion came to believe no other gods existed.

If one examines the use of denial formulae in the Hebrew Bible, the approach proposed in this article is shown to be quite workable. Drawing on the work Nathan MacDonald,<sup>13</sup> C. H. Williams,<sup>14</sup> and Hans Rechenmacher,<sup>15</sup> it can cogently be argued that these formulae are used in contexts that either affirm the existence of other gods in some way,<sup>16</sup> or that require interpreting the formulae as statements of incomparability, not denials of existence. Two illustrations of the latter will suffice here.

In Isa 47:8, 10 Babylon proclaims אֲנִי וְאִפְסֵי עוֹד ("I am, and there is none else beside me"). It would be nonsensical to take the denial formula as speaking of non-existence. The claim is not that Babylon is the only city in the world but that *she has no rival*. That is, the formulaic expression points to incomparability. It is noteworthy that these passages are part of Deutero-Isaiah, the corpus upon which the consensus view relies most heavily for its insistence that denial formulae prove that the biblical writers have rejected the existence of other deities. The same circumstance is found in Zeph 2:15, where Nineveh makes the

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote 3. On Job, though the book is set in a pre-Mosaic setting, linguistic features of the book strongly suggest that it was written much later, perhaps the sixth century B.C.E. or later. See A. Hurvitz, "The Date of the Prose Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered," *HTR* 67 (1974): 17-34.

<sup>12</sup> Gnuse, *Emergent Monotheism*, 201-205. Gnuse and others who share this view do not clarify how certain passages now used to prove polytheism were missed by this alleged campaign.

<sup>13</sup> Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism* (FAT 2. Reihe 1; Mohr-Siebeck, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> C. H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of אֲנִי הוּא in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (WUNT 113, II; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> H. Rechenmacher, "Außer mir gibt es keinen Gott!" *Eine sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Studie zur Ausschließlichkeitsformel* (ATSAT 49; St. Ottilien, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> See Heiser, "Monotheism," 13-18.

identical claim (אֲנִי וְאֶפְסֵי עוֹד). Once again the formula cannot constitute a denial of the existence of other cities. The point being made is very obviously incomparability.

By way of summary on the first set of assumptions that drive the consensus view, the fact that certain passages in the Hebrew Bible include plural אלהים only constitute proof for polytheism if one binds the term to a specific set of attributes. This approach has been shown to be flawed. The resulting allowance for plural אלהים does not contradict denial statements in the Hebrew Bible since those statements speak of Yahweh's incomparability rather than denying the existence of other אלהים. This is quite agreeable to the view of this paper that the biblical writers saw Yahweh as without ontological equal among אלהים. The discussion now moves to the second set of assumptions.

## 2.0. Divine Plurality Imported into the Text of the Hebrew Bible

### 2.1. Summary of the Issue

Those who see an evolution toward monotheism in Israelite religion also argue their case from a presumed distinction between Yahweh and Elyon ("the Most High") in the Hebrew Bible, namely in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82. In both passages it is alleged that the biblical writers drop hints that Yahweh and Elyon were once separate deities, a view that leads to the conclusion that orthodox Israelite theology was once polytheistic.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.2. Distinguishing Yahweh and Elyon: Deuteronomy 32:8-9

When the Most High (Elyon) gave the nations as an inheritance,<sup>18</sup>

when he divided mankind,

he fixed the borders of the peoples

בְּהִנְחַל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם<sup>8</sup>  
בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בֵּינֵי אָדָם  
יַצַּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים

<sup>17</sup> Once again, Mark Smith's comments are representative: "The author of Psalm 82 deposes the older theology, as Israel's deity is called to assume a new role as judge of all the world. Yet at the same time, Psalm 82, like Deut 32:8-9, preserves the outlines of the older theology it is rejecting. From the perspective of this older theology, Yahweh did not belong to the top tier of the pantheon. Instead, in early Israel the god of Israel apparently belonged to the second tier of the pantheon; he was not the presider god, but one of his sons" (Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 49).

<sup>18</sup> Deut 32:8a reads בְּהִנְחַל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם. בְּהִנְחַל is pointed as a Hiphil infinitive absolute, but should probably be understood as a defective spelling of the infinitive construct: בְּהִנְחַל (Paul Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*

[Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996], 154). The object of the infinitive form is גּוֹיִם. As Sanders notes, the Hiphil of the verb נחל can be "connected both with an *accusativus personae* (the inheriting person(s); hence some translations render: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance") or with an *accusativus rei* (the object inherited by this person; and so rendering, "When the Most High gave the nations as an inheritance"). Instructive parallels include Deut 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Josh 1:6; 1 Sam 2:8; Zech 8:12; and Prov 8:21 (Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 154).



according to the number of [the sons of God].

לְמִסְפָּר [בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים]:<sup>19</sup>

But YAHWEH'S portion is his people,

כִּי חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ<sup>9</sup>

Jacob his allotted inheritance.

יַעֲקֹב חֵבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ:

The evolutionary view argues that these two verses describe Elyon *giving* Yahweh His portion (Israel) among the nations. Thus two deities are in view; Yahweh is one of the many sons of Elyon, and it is Elyon who gives Yahweh Israel.

One obvious retort to this perspective is the parallel passage of Deut 4:19-20. Elyon is not mentioned. In verse 20, Yahweh is not given Israel by a presumably higher deity. Rather, the text specifically says Yahweh *took* (לָקַח) his own inheritance. This is cast as a sovereign act and would seem to nullify the assumption of two deities.

It is at this point that the card of the presumed dating of Deuteronomy and its constituent parts is played. Although minor disagreements exist among scholars, the formation of Deuteronomy is broadly conceived as including an original core, the codification of religious reforms in Deut 12-26. This core is framed by an introductory exhortation (Deut 5-11) and the addition of the curses and blessings of Deut 27-28 during the exile to explain that horrible event. Chapters 1-4 and 29-34 are thought to have been added during the exilic or post-exilic periods, but Deut 32-33 are considered independent pre-exilic poems re-purposed by the exilic or post-exilic editor.<sup>20</sup> This would mean that Deut 4:19-20 is more recent in Israelite history than Deut 32:8-9. This then is a crucial presumption for arguing that the theology of Deut 4:19-20 is more enlightened in light of the monotheistic evolutionary leap.

Another argument used to prove an older, polytheistic theology in Deut 32:8-9 is the fact that at some point the original reading "sons of God" was altered to "sons of Israel" preserved in MT.<sup>21</sup> Verse 43 also contains a reference to plural אֱלֹהִים that was removed from MT. We know about these alterations

because the Qumran material preserves the polytheistic reading. The LXX translation of בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים by ἀγγέλων θεοῦ ("angels of God") also allegedly illustrates a theological downgrading of the gods to angels in the wake of the rise of pure monotheism.

### 2.3. Assessing the Coherence of this Presumed Separation and Evolution

Both the arguments offered in defense of a pre-exilic polytheistic distinction between Yahweh and Elyon and a movement toward monotheism are tenuous in that they are driven by assumptions that have readily discernible weaknesses. The text-critical argument is the most obvious, and so provides a convenient starting point for assessment.

#### 2.3.1. The Text-Critical Issue

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>20</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy," *ABD* 2:171.

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 6.

Although the deletions that occurred in Deut 32:8, 43 do not directly relate to the Elyon and Yahweh separation, it is presumed that the alterations of the text were only made because the polytheistic content of the original readings offended scribes who had adopted a militant monotheism. This argument has two weaknesses: it assumes that the monotheistic biblical writers could not abide plural אלהים in the first place, and its argument falls prey to circular reasoning by assuming what it seeks to prove.

Regarding the first weakness, the understanding of אלהים covered earlier in this paper undercuts any perceived need on the part of Israelite scribes to rid the text of plural אלהים. The usage of אלהים by the biblical writers demonstrates that they did not connect the term to a unique set of attributes. In fact, even after this presumed editing campaign, both MT and LXX retain a number of references to plural אלהים, even in perceptibly late material (e.g., Job 1-2).<sup>22</sup> This is no surprise if the writers thought of אלהים as indicating residence in the unseen spiritual world.

Though it is beyond dispute that a scribe altered the text, the facts of the matter are that no one knows *when* the changes occurred and *why*, especially when other instances of divine plurality are left untouched. Those who want an evolution to monotheism assume the deletions happened during the exilic or post-exilic period near the point of the alleged monotheistic leap. There is no secure evidence for this. The earliest textual data we have are the Qumran scrolls, which do not witness to the MT reading, the reading supposedly created by the zealous monotheistic scribe in the post-exilic period. Consequently, it could be argued that the allegedly polytheistic Qumran reading preserved the original reading, which survived well after the post-exilic period. The alteration could have been made much later in the Common Era, at the time when MT as we know it was created (ca. 100 C.E.) in the process of textual standardization.<sup>23</sup> The current data do not allow a specific conclusion, and so one ought to be avoided. Even if such evidence was forthcoming and showed the alteration was made in the exilic or post-exilic period, it would not address *why* the change was made, which is the fundamental issue. Why this passage would receive such a change when others did not would remain an open question. Moreover, it is logically flawed to presume that one scribe's reason for an alteration means that all scribes or all Jews shared the editor's theology. The argument that the altered text shows a zeal for militant monotheism against an antiquated polytheism is thus defended on the basis that it must have occurred at a time of monotheistic zeal. The circularity of the argument is transparent.

Finally, in regard to the "downgrading" of plural אלהים figures to angels in LXX, the motivation is likewise unclear and the data are inconsistent. It is simply a fact of observation that LXX is uneven in its treatment of plural אלהים, as it uses θεοι and υιοι θεου in passages where the Hebrew would be plural אלהים. The use of ἀγγέλων θεοῦ therefore cannot be coherently defended as indicating a theological shift in Jewish thinking about divine plurality. If that were the case, one would expect to find theological consistency in

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<sup>22</sup> On Job, see footnote 11.

<sup>23</sup> E. Tov, "Textual Criticism (OT)," *ABD* 6:395, 407.

the text of the Hebrew Bible in that regard, especially at a time period as late as that of the creation of LXX, at least two centuries after the presumed rise of pure monotheism. The Qumran material also mars the neatness of the picture offered by the consensus explanation due to the numerous instances of plural אלהים, often in divine council contexts, in that corpus.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.3.2. Distinguishing Yahweh and Elyon

Moving on to whether Yahweh and Elyon are separated in Deut 32:8-9, this writer has addressed this issue in more detail elsewhere, so what follows are summary points, with some new points of critique.<sup>25</sup>

First, one notices immediately how Deut 1-4 are conveniently dated as post-exilic, and Deut 32-33 are likewise conveniently considered independent and pre-exilic. Those who see Deut 1-4 as post-exilic would say that the reason Deut 4:19-20 has Yahweh taking his inheritance and no mention of other gods is that Israelite religion had evolved away from that belief by the end of the exile. It is therefore utterly crucial for the consensus view that Deut 1-4 to have been composed during the monotheistic innovation. But on what basis is the post-exilic period for Deut 1-4 proposed? While there might be textual reasons to see Deut 1-4 as written after Deut 32, both could still be pre-exilic. That is, it could also be the case that textual indications of a later hand might only be brief editorial adaptations, so that both sections could have been largely composed at the same time, the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.

To bring this initial objection into focus, there are certain essential elements for defending a post-exilic date for Deut 1-4. Without explicit data arising from the morphology, grammar, or syntax found in Deut 1-4 (and especially chapter 4), the argument becomes circular: the wording of Deut 4:19-20 shows an evolution from polytheism because Deut 1-4 is to be dated to the post-exilic era, as demonstrated by the monotheistic wording of Deut 4:19-20. Precisely what is it, then, apart from an *a priori* assumption of a post-exilic provenance, that compels us to see Deut 1-4 as not only later than Deut 32, but deriving from that time period that the consensus view believes birthed intolerant monotheism?

On another front, there must be no evidence that would suggest with high clarity that both Deut 1-4 and Deut 32 are both pre-exilic. It matters not that Deut 4:19-20 is later than Deut 32:8-9. The crucial issue is that Deut 4:19-20 was composed in light of the religious impulse toward intolerant monotheism that allegedly occurred in the late exilic or post-exilic era. In fact, the central theological idea of Deut 4:19-20 (and Deut 32:8-9), that Yahweh alone has sovereign authority over the nations so that he can take Israel as his own to the rejection of the others, is found in pre-exilic texts. There is therefore no need to view the idea as a late religious innovation that was the result of an evolution out of polytheism (see Section 2.5.2. below).

Second, I think it is worth noting that Deut 32:8-9 never actually says Yahweh received or was given anything. That is, there is no actual description of any interaction between Yahweh and Elyon; it is simply assumed. Deuteronomy 32:9 merely reads: "But Yahweh's portion was Israel; Jacob his allotted inheritance." These are verbless clauses. The idea of Elyon *giving* the subordinate Yahweh his portion actually has to be read into the passage. It is nowhere stated. This is allowing one's presuppositions to

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<sup>24</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>25</sup> M. Heiser, "Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8-9 and Psalm 82?" *HIPHIL* 3 (2006); online journal, <http://see-j.net/index.php/hiphil/article/view/29>; posted October 3, 2006.

guide interpretation.

Third, Deut 32:6-7 utilize vocabulary associated with El and Baal in Ugaritic material to describe Yahweh. This is no surprise since, as is well known by Hebrew Bible scholars, the biblical writers associated epithets and other descriptors of both Canaanite El and Baal with Yahweh, a phenomenon at times used as evidence for an original Israelite polytheism. By all accounts in critical scholarship, this conceptual fusion occurred prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. But note that this fusion is not a fusion of Elyon and Yahweh, but of identifying certain attributes of El and Baal with Yahweh.<sup>26</sup> Some would object at this point that since Canaanite El was the high sovereign and father of the other gods, it makes good sense to have Yahweh subordinate to El (Elyon). But it is actually Baal, not El, who has the title Elyon in Ugaritic material and above whom is no other, and so the neatness of the presumed correlation is again marred.<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, presuming a source-critical approach to the Pentateuch, I have to wonder what scholars who distinguish Yahweh and Elyon on the basis of Deut 32:8-9 do with the J source. Specifically, is J later than Deut 32? Had J evolved to monotheism? I raise the issue because the event Deut 32:8-9 draws upon for the division of the nations is Gen 11:1-9, part of the J source. The point is that *the ancient J source has Yahweh doing the dividing*. How could J have missed the polytheistic outlook known to whoever wrote Deut 32 when both were pre-exilic? Perhaps it is premature to conclude that the pre-exilic writer of Deut 32:8-9 was a polytheist.

#### 2.4. Distinguishing Yahweh from Elyon: Psalm 82

Despite the tenuous nature of using Deut 32:8-9 and Deut 4:19-20 to argue an evolution from polytheism to monotheism, those who hold the consensus view are unmoved, for the assumption is absolutely crucial. Without it, there is little in the way of an evolutionary pinnacle. That brings us to Psalm 82.

Psalm 82	Flow of the Psalm (Evolutionary View)
<p><sup>1</sup> God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he passes judgment:</p> <p><sup>2</sup> "How long will you judge unjustly</p>	<p><b>Yahweh</b> standing in the council of <b>El (Elyon)</b>, who is the seated judge (v. 1)</p>

<sup>26</sup> This writer argued in his dissertation that Israelite religion retained a divine council structure with a co-regency at the top that mirrors the relationship of El and Baal, but that the biblical writers fill both slots with Yahweh. This conceptual decision reflects a binitarian approach to Yahweh found elsewhere in the Tanakh, featuring an invisible and a visible Yahweh, closely co-identified, which involves appearance in human form and, at times, embodiment. The literary strategies reflect an aversion to polytheism—rule by a co-regency of two distinct deities—in favor of rule by Yahweh, enacted in many instances by a co-regent or agent who “was but wasn’t” Yahweh. This was the conceptual framework for the Two Powers in Heaven theology that emerged in Second Temple Judaism and the high Christology of the New Testament. On the Two Powers in Heaven theology of early Judaism, see Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> N. Wyatt, “The Titles of the Ugaritic Storm God,” *UF* 24 (1992): 419. See *KTU* 1.4.iv.43-44; 1.16.iii.6-8. Baal of course did not father the other gods of Ugaritic religion, but was himself a son of El (or Dagan, who may be El). For the discussion of the Baal’s description as the son of Dagan and how scholars understand the relationship (or not) of El and Dagan, see Heiser, “Divine Council,” 43-45; N. Wyatt, “The Relationship of the Deities Dagan and Hadad,” *UF* 12 (1980): 375-379; J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 354; and G. del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson; Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1999), 74.

<p>and show partiality to the wicked? <i>Selah</i></p> <p><sup>3</sup> Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”</p> <p><sup>5</sup> They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;</p> <p><sup>7</sup> nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”</p> <p><sup>8</sup> Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!</p>	<p><b>Yahweh</b> brings the charge against the <i>elohim</i> of the council (vv. 2-5), the sons of <b>Elyon</b> of v.6</p> <p><b>Yahweh</b> (“I said”) refers to the council <i>elohim</i> as sons of <b>Elyon</b> and pronounces judgment upon them (vv. 6-7)</p> <p>The psalmist cries out to <b>Yahweh</b> to “rise up” and inherit all the nations as their own (v. 8), in the wake of the gods who have been stripped of their immortality (cp. Deut 32:8-9 where the nations were given as inheritances to the sons of God)</p>
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Psalm 82 is part of the Elohist psalter, and so it is assumed that where **אלהים** is used for a singular deity (Psa 82:1, 8) the psalm originally read Yahweh. The consensus view argues that the first verse has Yahweh standing in the council of El (the high sovereign in Ugaritic religion). The Elyon (“Most High”) of in verse 6 is presumed to be El from verse 1. The verbal lemma in verse 1 (**נצב**) is often used in texts whose genre is the covenant lawsuit and depicts one standing before a judge to bring a charge against the plaintiff. In Psalm 82, then, Yahweh is presumed to be playing the role of prosecutor, decrying the corruption of the gods of El’s council, implying that Yahweh and El are distinct deities. When the reader comes to verse 6 the prosecutor Yahweh refers to the gods as “sons of Elyon” not as his own sons. This also implies a separation of Yahweh and Elyon, the latter of which is seen as the seated judge in the council courtroom scene. The last verse is then read as the psalmist pleading for Yahweh (**אלהים** in the Elohist text) to rise up and inherit the nations after judging the gods in verse 7 (but see below for an another view). The supposition is that Yahweh was not previously viewed as the global sovereign of the nations. The psalm therefore casts Yahweh’s elevation as a new idea and a shift in Israelite religion.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, the psalm is taken as post-exilic. The message of the psalm is that Israelite religion had evolved to kill off the gods and the divine council in favor of the new monotheistic innovation, where no god but Yahweh existed.

<sup>28</sup> S. Parker states that, “There is no question that the occurrences of *elohim* in verses 1a, 8 refer (as usually in the Elohist psalter) to Yahweh . . . Yahweh is actually just “one of the assembled gods under a presiding El or Elyon . . . the psalmist then balances this with an appeal to Yahweh to assume the governance of the world” (Simon B. Parker, “The Beginning of the Reign of God – Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy,” *Revue Biblique* 102 [1995]: 546). Mark Smith echoes this view: “[A] prophetic voice emerges in verse 8, calling for God (now called *’elohîm*) to assume the role of judge over all the earth. . . . Here Yahweh in effect is asked to assume the job of all the gods to rule their nations in addition to Israel” (Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 48).

## 2.5. *Distinguishing Yahweh from Elyon: Psalm 82*

### 2.5.1. Incoherence in the Presumed Flow of Psalm 82 that Produces Distinct Deities

The logical incoherence of the evolutionary view is readily evident. If we presume Yahweh is the standing prosecutor and Elyon is the seated judge in Psa 82, things seem workable through verse 5, as Yahweh is bringing accusation. But at verses 6-7 there is a problem. The first person “I said” in verse 6 would be Yahweh speaking—but that would in turn mean Yahweh also pronounces the sentence (the role of the judge) in verse 7. It seems odd to have Yahweh be both prosecutor and judge if a distinct El is present.

This observation is important because the evolutionary view wants to distinguish between the prosecutor and judge to achieve two deities in the passage. The solution for the evolutionary view cannot be that Yahweh is doing both tasks, for that begs the very obvious question of why you’d need two deities in the scene in the first place. If Yahweh is also doing what the judge is supposed to do, why do we need Elyon as the judge? Verse 8 also presents a coherence problem. The psalmist pleads for Yahweh to “rise up” and inherit the nations—but wasn’t it Elyon who was supposedly seated in the heavenly courtroom as judge?

This coherence problem was perceived by David Frankel in a recent article on Psalm 82.<sup>29</sup> Frankel asserts that Yahweh is the speaker in vv. 2-5 but then “El is the speaker, who plays the role of high judge in vv. 6–8.”<sup>30</sup> He also believes that it is El who calls upon Yahweh in the last verse to rise up and rule the nations.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, Frankel offers no grammatical or syntactical reasons for a change of speaker in verses 6-7 from Yahweh to El. He cannot be blamed for oversight because there are no grammatical or syntactical features to support the argument. Frankel’s argument is made on the basis of need, not exegesis.

With respect to verse 8, Frankel argues that the speaker in verse 8 cannot be Yahweh since it is Yahweh who is addressed. This new speaker appears in verse 6 for Frankel, thus accommodating the issue of verse 8. This writer agrees that verse 8 requires a new speaker, but contra Frankel, that speaker is not El, nor is there a need for a change of speaker in verse 6. Frankel wants El to be speaking in verses 6-8, and this need is essential to his attempted solution for resolving the incoherence of seeing two deities in Psalm 82. But there is not a single textual cue that compels this identification that Frankel can marshal. His attempt thus fails if the concern was to root interpretation in the text, as opposed to defending the idea of an evolution from polytheism to monotheism.

At this point, Frankel and others would ask this writer to make sense of his own view that Yahweh is both prosecutor and judge in the psalm, as well as the speaker in verses 6-7. If Mark Smith and many others who argue with him are correct in their assertion that Israelite religion had successfully identified both El and Baal with Yahweh by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, this writer’s position is on solid ground. Smith argues for this date on the basis of archaeological data: “Asherah, having been a consort of El, would have become Yahweh's

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<sup>29</sup> Frankel, “El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6-8,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* vol. 16, article 16 (2010); located at [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_144.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_144.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Frankel, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

consort . . . only if these two gods were identified by this time."<sup>32</sup> This means that El and Yahweh would have been seen as the same deity in Israelite religion by that time—*before the exile*.<sup>33</sup> Popular religion expressed that belief by hailing Asherah as Yahweh's wife (she was formerly associated with El), an idea known from inscriptions at Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. As such, casting Yahweh in the El role of judge in Psalm 82 seems quite mundane, especially if the Psalm is dated later than the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Even the designation "in the council of El" is not at odds with this writer's view. While **אל** in the phrase **לְעֵדֹת־אֱלֹהִים** could be adjectival in force ("in the divine council"),<sup>34</sup> that is not essential to this writer's view. Since Yahweh and El would have been the same for the psalmist, the use of **אל** would of no necessity prevent Yahweh from being in view.

Against this writer Frankel would charge that if Yahweh was head of the council at the beginning of the psalm there would be "little new in the call of verse 8 that YHWH take up rule of the world." This writer disagrees. The new element is not that Yahweh suddenly becomes sovereign—that idea is pre-exilic as we shall see momentarily—but that Yahweh is pronouncing his eschatological will to take back the nations he disinherited at Babel, as described in Deut 32:8-9.

## 2.5.2. Yahweh's Supremacy Over the Nations and Their Gods in Pre-Exilic Texts

The idea that Yahweh's kingship over the gods and their nations is post-exilic—a notion crucial to any defense of an evolution toward monotheism—ignores evidence to the contrary in the Hebrew Bible. For example, the idea is transparently stated in several enthronement psalms that date to well before the exilic period. Psalm 29 :1 is instructive. Some scholars, such as F.M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, date the poetry of this psalm between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.<sup>35</sup> The very first verse contains plural imperatives directed at the **בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים**, pointing to a divine council context. Verse 10 declares, "Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever." In Israelite cosmology, the flood upon which Yahweh sat was the watery covering thought to be over the solid dome that enclosed the round, flat earth. This throne obviously did not cover only Israel! As such, it cannot coherently be denied that the author viewed the Gentile nations under the dome and flood as being under the authority of Yahweh. This verse thus reflects the idea of world kingship. The thought is echoed in the Song of Moses, also among the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>36</sup> In Exodus 15:11 we encounter the rhetorical "Who is like you, O

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Origins*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> For El as a title of Yahweh, see the examples in Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999), 49.

<sup>34</sup> See Psa 36:7. The noun **אלהים** is also occasionally used this way (e.g., 1 Sam 14:15; Jonah 3:3).

<sup>35</sup> F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 151-157; idem., "Notes on a Canaanite Psalm in the Old Testament," *BASOR* 117 (1950): 19-21; F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 45, n. 59. Cross dates the psalm on many criteria, including ancient poetic structures and the high degree of structural and content similarities to a Canaanite Baal hymn (CTA 5.1.1.5).

<sup>36</sup> Cross tended to date the Song of Moses earlier than scholars do today, though the material is certainly pre-exilic (see Yigal Bloch, "The Prefixed Perfective and the Dating of Early Hebrew—A Re-Evaluation," *VT* 59 [2009]: 34-70). After a lengthy examination Bloch concludes: "[T]he use of prefixed verbal forms to signify past situations in the Song of

Yahweh, among the gods?" followed in verse 18 by "Yahweh will reign forever and ever." As F. M. Cross noted over thirty years ago, "The kingship of the gods is a common theme in early Mesopotamian and Canaanite epics. The common scholarly position that the concept of Yahweh as reigning or king is a relatively late development in Israelite thought seems untenable."<sup>37</sup> This writer would agree, but would add this question: If pre-exilic Israelites in fact believed that the nations were under the authority of other gods (Deut 32:8-9), how is it that scholars who promote the evolutionary view presume that the biblical writer's statement, "Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods?" would *exclude* Yahweh's supremacy over the nations of those gods?

Other pre-exilic texts can be brought to the discussion. Psalm 47:2 not only declares that Yahweh is a great king over all the earth, but in so doing it equates Yahweh with Elyon: "For the LORD (YHWH), the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth." Verse 7 adds, "God is the king of all the earth." This psalm belongs to the category labeled by scholars as "enthronement psalms." J.J. M. Roberts argued that the psalm should be situated in the "cultic celebration of Yahweh's imperial accession, based on the relatively recent victories of David's age."<sup>38</sup>

Other psalms likewise equate Yahweh and Elyon in the process of declaring him king of the nations and their gods. Psalm 97 is illustrative, though most critical scholars classify this psalm as late. As with Deut 1-4, however, there are no morphological or grammatical criteria for doing so, only the presumption that the religious outlook of the psalm must be post-exilic since it contains an idea associated with enlightened monotheism (97:7). The fact that Psa 97 utilizes storm theophany imagery associated with the divine warrior motif, known to be early, is lost in the discussion. Psalm 108:5 is also noteworthy, as it proclaims, "be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!" Critics take the psalm as exilic or post-exilic, but then apparently ignore the similar phrasing in Isaiah 6:3. One is forced to ask why this language in Psa 108:5 dictates a post-exilic date when the same thought is communicated First Isaiah, which is clearly pre-exilic? It could be posited that the psalmist adopted the language from the earlier Isaiah, but that is precisely the point—the *content is early*.

A narrative sampling of the same idea is readily available in the Deuteronomistic History (DH). The writer(s) of the DH presumed that Yahweh controlled the destiny of the nations targeted for removal from Canaan. How could Israel's pre-exilic writers express the belief over and over again that Yahweh would defeat and banish the nations in Israel's land if they had no inclination to believe that He was supreme over the nations and their gods? No scholar would date the DH to after the exile.

Finally, an Ugaritic parallel is worth consideration. If we assume with the evolutionary view that Israel's early polytheistic divine council theology comes from Ugaritic material (or at least is closely related), then why is it that we cannot *also* presume Yahweh was king of all the nations—when Baal is referred to as "lord

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the Sea, in the Song of Moses and in the psalm of 2 Sam. 22/Ps. 18 (or at least in the narrative parts of the latter) justifies dating these poems a couple of centuries before the Babylonian exile—i.e., to the 8th-7th, or perhaps even the 9th, centuries B.C.E.

<sup>37</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 99, n. 30.

<sup>38</sup> J.J.M. Roberts, "The Religio-Political Setting of Psalm 47," *BASOR* 221 (Feb 1976): 132.



of the earth”?<sup>39</sup> Was not Yahweh identified with Baal before the exile? It is hard not to suspect that the answer would be that the data do not fit the picture and are not admissible as evidence.

### 3.0. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper was to highlight the major arguments used to assert the evolution of Israelite religion from polytheism to monotheism. This writer rejects this view because the arguments are based on flawed presuppositions brought to terms like אלהים and passages like Deut 32:8-9 and Psalm 82. His own view is that the biblical writers affirmed an unseen world filled with אלהים, but that term is not to be linked to a specific set of attributes that would result in a denial of the ontological uniqueness of Yahweh and his exclusive worship. This, then, was the orthodoxy of the biblical writers throughout the time of their writing. However, that is not to say that all Israelites or even a majority of Israelites believed this at many points in Israelite history. Both the Hebrew Bible and the archaeological remains inform us that there was a broad spectrum of beliefs about Yahweh and his nature among the people. As is the case today, despite the fact that all Jews and Christians have full access to the books they consider canonical, there is still diversity of belief about God. How much more in ancient Israel?

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<sup>39</sup> See *Context of Scripture*, 1.86 (the Ba‘alu Myth) where the relevant phrases associated with Baal are *’il klh* (“god [over, of] all of it [earth in context] and Baal’s title *zbl b’l arṣ*, “the Prince, lord of the earth”). The phrases are somewhat controversial, but most scholars would presume they denote a cosmic-geographical rule extending from Baal’s council mountain of Ṣapanu over the affairs of all humankind—something quite in concert with Psa 82 (and by extension, Deut 4 and 32). Dennis Pardee notes in relation to the issue: “The phrase here is *’il klh*, precisely the same as was used twice above with reference to Kôtaru-wa-Ḥasīsu’s hegemony in Memphis (see note 19). Because they assume that Ba‘lu is king of the earth, some scholars have felt constrained to take *’arṣ* here as denoting a particular land (cf. Caquot, Sznycer and Herdner 1974:258, n. o). On the other hand, a formal claim to kingship of the earth is not to be found in the various statements regarding Ba‘lu’s kingship. The closest one comes to the expression of such a concept is in one of his standard titles, *zbl b’l arṣ*, “the Prince, master of the earth,” and in the phrase *’arṣ drkt*, “the land of (his) domain” [CTA 4 vii 44]). Because of the very specific terminology used in this passage, viz., that ‘Aṭtaru climbs (’ly) Mount Ṣapānu to take Ba‘lu’s throne and descends (*yrđ*) from there when he abandons that throne, it does not appear implausible to interpret ‘Aṭtaru’s rôle as king of the earth as referring to the earth as flatlands. Such a limited kingship may already have been referred to in CTA 2 iii 17–18 (see above, note 50). This hegemony, though ultimately granted by ‘Ilu, may have been seen as a vice–regency under Ba‘lu’s control (in normal times, of course, when Ba‘lu is in control). The facts that (1) goddesses have claimed Ba‘lu as their king (CTA 3 v 40 [here line 32]; 4 iv 43); (2) Ba‘lu’s kingship is stated in this and other passages to be “on the heights of Ṣapānu”; (3) the members of one of the so–called “pantheons,” the best known, are described as “the gods of Ṣapānu” (RS 1.017:1 = CTA 29:1), lead to the conclusion that Ba‘lu was somehow seen as the king of the earth in the context of divine contact with the earth at Mount Ṣapānu. Descriptions of his activities also indicate that the link between mountain tops, storm clouds, and his function as provider of rain were inextricably linked (see particularly the link between the window in his palace and the phenomena of thunder and lightning, above CTA 4 vii 25–37). It appears plausible, therefore, to posit a Ug. conception of Ba‘lu as king of mountains and storms and ‘Aṭtaru as king of the flat earth, under Ba‘lu’s control” (William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture* [Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997-], 269-70, note 250).

