

Explain and account for the varied use of the Divine Council motif in the Hebrew Bible

§1. The Ugaritic and Canaanite Background to the Divine Council

It is generally accepted that Israelite religion “was much closer to Canaanite religion” than to the religion that the Hebrew Bible advocates ([Cook 2005: 7](#)). It is most likely that Israelite religion was directly influenced by, and developed from, the Canaanite cult. Hence, it is not surprising that we should find similarities between the two religions, one of them being the “divine council” motif.

The Divine Council motif refers to the Hebrew Bible concept of an assembly of apparent heavenly beings. For example, in Psalm 89 there is mention of the congregation (*q^ehal*) and the assembly (*sôd*) of the holy ones (*q^edoshîm*) (v. 5). Similarly, Job 1:6 talks of the Sons of God(s) (*b^enei ha'elohîm*) as does Genesis 2:4, 6. These titles are also found in Bronze Age texts from Mesopotamia and Syria. Smith mentions *phr 'ilm* (“the assembly of the gods”), *phr bn 'ilm* (“the assembly of divine sons”), and *phr m'd* (“the assembly of the council”) which appear in the Keret Legend ([Smith 2003: 41](#)). It is thus seen that the Israelite concept of the divine council is influenced by, and probably arises from, prior Ancient Near Eastern religious beliefs. However, the question that must now be addressed is why it has varied appearances in the Hebrew Bible and why the theology of this council is not consistent throughout.

§2. The Polytheism of the Hebrew Bible

It has already been noted that Israelite religion grew out of a polytheistic Canaanite background, and this in fact can still be seen in some Hebrew Bible texts. Yet, to understand them it is necessary to be aware of the Canaanite pantheon and the roles of the deities which constitute it in order to show the links between both religions.

In the Canaanite pantheon the god El is the patriarch, and Asherah the matriarch who in turn gives birth to seventy sons, who are attested to in Ugaritic texts (*šb'm. bn. 'atrt*, “seventy sons of Asherah”) ([Day 1985: 175](#)). The patriarch El was also referred to as *El Elyon* (El Most High), *'ab 'adm* (father of humanity), and “El the warrior.” It has also been suggested that the sun, moon and stars were associated with El in West Semitic religion ([Freedman 2000: 384](#)). It is probably even the case that originally Israel worshipped the deity El, and Smith & Miller point to the name ‘Israel’ as being indicative of this, seeing as it includes the theophoric element **'el* and not a Yahwistic one such as **-iah*. ([Smith & Miller 2002: 32](#)). Again, Biblical Texts such as Genesis 33:20 could be used to support

this. In this account Jacob arrives at Shechem, on his return from Paddan-aram, and erects an altar called “El, God of Israel” (*The Jerusalem Bible*), and frequently in Genesis God is calls himself, “El Shaddai.”

Smith and Miller also point to Deut. 32:8-9 which they interpret as being indicative of the later development of Yahweh’s role as one of El’s sons;

When the Most High (*’el ’elyôn*) apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;
Yahweh’s own portion was his people,
Jacob his allotted share.

In this passage El (Elyon), the patriarch, is seen handing out the nations of the earth to his children deities. Smith and Miller further that, “it also suggests that Yahweh ... was known separately from El at an early point in early Israel” (Smith & Miller 2002: 32). All of this implies that polytheism was explicit within the early Israelite cultus. As Kien states, “popular religion throughout Judah and Israel was polytheistic,” (Kien 2000: 68) and this is supported by archaeological evidence such as the Kuntillet ‘Arjud inscriptions which invoke “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah” and “Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah.” (Mendenhall & Herion 2001: 139). Asherah, as mentioned, in Canaanite myth was the companion goddess of El and it appears that El’s role was later usurped by Yahweh (Smith & Miller 2002: 33). Moreover, the Ta’anach cult stand provides more evidence that Asherah was considered an important deity in ancient Israel, if one accepts that there is an aniconic representation of Yahweh present as well.

Overall, the main contributing factor to the development of the Divine Council motif in the Hebrew Bible is the polytheistic traditions of the Ancient Near East. It is most likely that originally Yahweh was not seen as a patriarchal deity, but rather as so-called ‘son of El.’ Smith mentions Psalm 82 as one Biblical text that presents this point of view, “Texts that mention both El and Yahweh but not as the same figure (Genesis 49; Numbers 23-24; ... Psalm 82) suggest an early accommodation of the two in some early form of Israelite polytheism” (Smith 2003: 143). Although Psalm 82 does not include the divine name Smith suggests that the *elohim* of verse one who takes his stand in the congregation of *el* is Yahweh, and so that in verse 6 when the psalmist declares “all of you are sons of *elyon*”, *elohim* is being figured as a son of *elyon*. Furthermore, verse 8, he says, tells that Yahweh (*elohim*) has been asked to judge the earth, for it is him that is to inherit all nations. However, Smith’s assertion cannot be fully supported due to the lack of use of Yahweh’s name. But, what is certain is that a multitude of

deities are being mentioned, all deliberating amongst themselves (v. 1, 6). There is little room for doubt that this Psalm illustrates an early view of the Divine Council motif in the Hebrew Bible, and is very likely rooted in its Canaanite background.

§3. *The Promotion of Yahweh*

The next portrayal of the Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible emphasises the role of Yahweh, and even promotes him to patriarch, thus usurping the role of El, and indeed Yahweh himself is identified as El. Smith and Miller propose that later on in the history of Ancient Israel, maybe “due to trade with Edom/Midian”, Yahweh entered secondarily into the Israelite highland religion. Additionally, other deities in the Bible like Baal, Asherah, and El would have been considered part of the pantheon with Yahweh (Smith & Miller 2003: 33). As time went on eventually El and Yahweh were equated with one another, and this is seen in Biblical passages which parallel Yahweh and El, for example;

It is he who makes her (Zion) what she is,
He, the most High (*elyon*), Yahweh.
Psalm 87:5-6, *The Jerusalem Bible*

I raise my hand in the presence of Yahweh, God Most High (*el elyon*),
Creator of heaven and earth.
Genesis 14:22, *The Jerusalem Bible*

There are also links in the Hebrew Bible between El’s roles and Yahweh’s. As Day notes, the ancient Israelites must have had no problem in assimilating El and Yahweh because El’s characteristic attributes were similar to Yahweh’s, and perhaps El’s characteristics were wholly fit to be added to Yahweh’s (Day 2002: 15).

Yahweh has now taken over the role of El as head of the Divine Council – and this concept is reflected in the Biblical texts, and is much more prolific throughout the Hebrew Bible. He is now come to be known as “God of gods” (Deut. 10:17, Josh. 22:22, Psa. 136:2), and “Most High over the world, far transcending all other gods” (Psa. 97:8, *The Jerusalem Bible*). It is worth noting that although Yahweh has become the head of the Divine Council this in no way negates the divinity of any other beings therein. However, the theological concept of Yahweh as the head on the pantheon shapes the way the Israelite people view the other gods. Deuteronomic authors set up a strong Yahweh-only polemic, and condemn the worship or adoration of other gods. Noll, for example, points out Deut. 5:7-10, in which Yahweh does not permit the worship of *elohim acherim* (‘other gods’) because he is a jealous god. Indeed, if these gods did not exist then Yahweh would have no justifiable

cause to be jealous or even feel threatened by them. He also mentions what he describes as redacted monotheistic statements found in Deut. 4; “Yahweh is the Elohim in the heavens above and in the earth beneath. There is no other” (v. 39). (Noll 2001: 249). This, of course, does not need to be viewed through the lens of monotheism, as is discussed later

This promotion of Yahweh also, perhaps, gives birth to other representations of Deity, one of these being the “Royal God” image. That is, Yahweh’s role and cult image has been reshaped to a King who possesses a court (in this case, of gods). As Zimmerli and Green comment, “When the faith of Israel applied the title ‘King’ to Yahweh, it assigned to him the place occupied in the Canaanite pantheon by El, the highest god” (Zimmerli & Green 1978: 41) and De Pury adds that El did possess the title of *il malk* (‘El, the King’) (De Pury 1999: 289). Whilst Yahweh eventually took on El’s attributes and position, this does not necessarily have to be through intentional propaganda on Israel’s part. The decline in El’s worship may have led to the rise of Yahweh’s; it does not have to be the other way around.

§4. *The Divine Council Motif in Kingship*

As Yahweh became increasingly identified with the title of “King” it should come as no surprise that this motif was used to validate and reinforce the power status of the Israelite Monarchy. For example, in Psalms 2 and 110, the so-called “coronation psalms” (Day 2003: 92) because they probably were used at such ceremonies, there are statements which promote the King’s prominence.

“This is my king, installed by me
On Zion, my holy mountain.
Let me proclaim Yahweh’s decree;
He has told me, ‘You are my son,
Today I have become your father.’
Psalm 2:6-7, *The Jerusalem Bible*

Yahweh’s oracle to you, my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand
And I will make your enemies a footstool for you.’
Psalm 110:1, *The Jerusalem Bible*

Thus, as a ‘Son of God’ the king not only had access to the Divine Council in which the Sons of God also presided, but was considered a (semi-) divine being himself. For example, in Psalm 45:6 the Davidic king is addressed as *elohim* and it is promised that his throne would endure forever and he

would be given command over the nations (just as Yahweh has command) – a theme that is also present in the coronation psalms (cf. Psalm 2:8, 110:6-7) (Kaiser 1991: 161).

This theme, i.e. the king in the Divine Council, is portrayed negatively in Isaiah 14. It depicts the defeat of a Neo-Assyrian/Babylonian king who claimed he would raise his throne above the “stars of God (*el*)” (v. 13) and who would make himself like “the Most High (*el elyon*)” (v. 14) and sit on the “mount of the assembly” (v. 13). From this text it can be seen that kings were considered to have access to the Divine Council. This is perhaps an over generalisation. It would probably be more correct to assert that kings had access to the divine council in the context of the temple cultus, i.e. in the temple, which was seen as a point of interaction between the divine realm of God(s) above and the human realm below. This imagery is found in Isaiah 14 when the king is described as wanting to ascend to the “mount of the assembly” and to the “heights of Zaphon” (v. 13) which both conjure up the cosmic mountain image; that is, the idea that the temple is founded upon the cosmic mountain which allows it access to the divine council who convene thereupon.

§5. The Divine Council Motif in Prophecy

As well as serving to legitimise kings, Yahweh and his council also serve to endorse prophets (another cult functionary). For example, when Ahab hears the prophet Micaiah’s unfavourable oracle he speaks out about it, yet Micaiah gives his proclamation authority by declaring:

I saw the LORD sitting on his throne,
And all the host of heaven standing by him
On his right hand and on his left
1 Kings 22:19, *King James Version*

And again in Jeremiah prophetic authority is seen as originating from Yahweh’s council:

For who has stood in the council of the LORD
So as to see and hear his word?
Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it?
Jeremiah 23:18, *NRSV*

This text asserts that to “see and hear [Yahweh’s] word ... so as to proclaim it” (v. 18) one must be able to stand in his council. Notice the wording of this passage; “to see ... Yahweh’s word.” Clearly this must be a reference to the method in which the oracle is received – in this instance through a vision of the assembly.

In Isaiah 6 this idea is strongly promoted, i.e. that to stand in God's council gives one the authority to declare God's word. Isaiah sees "the Lord Yahweh seated on a high throne" (v. 1) and "above him stood seraphim ... and they cried out ... 'Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth.'" (v. 2, 3). In this scene the seraphim ('flaming ones') are members of God's council, and this too is attested in his name *Sabaoth*, "hosts". Thus, Isaiah, a temple based prophet (v. 1), sees Yahweh on his throne, and thus as a king (v. 5), and it is through this that he is able to respond to God's calling for a prophet to declare His word (v. 8). Hence, not only does this passage exemplify the role of the council in prophecy, it also demonstrates the council's dealing with cult functionaries, such as the king, priest and prophet. In fact, it could even be stated that the now hierarchical understanding of the council allows the Israelite religion to support its own beaurocratic cultus, e.g. high priest, priests, scribes, prophets, laity etc; or, the case maybe that the Israelite understanding of the divine council was built around their own prophetic/kingly set up at that time (Smith & Miller 2002: 38).

§6. The Further Theological Reshaping of the Divine Council

In later Biblical and post-Biblical literature the Divine Council motif undergoes further theology reshaping. For example, in this period there are now named members of the council besides Yahweh, and they are given their own unique functions. One obvious example of this is in the character of the *satan* ('accuser'):

One day the Sons of God came to attend on Yahweh,
And among them was Satan.
Job 1:6, *The Jerusalem Bible*

The name/title 'Satan' means 'accuser' and is a legal term which designates, roughly, the prosecuting attorney; he "acts in the interest of God by raising questions concerning the righteous" (Grenz 2000: 226). Other members of the council that are explicitly named are Michael and Gabriel (Dan. 10: 13, 21; 12: 1; 8: 16; 9: 21).

What we have here, and especially with the book of Daniel, is more of an emphasis on the transcendence of God. As such there must be liminal creatures to operate between the divine realm and the human one. As more and more emphasis was laid on the so-called 'otherness of God' and on his exalted nature as king, the other members of the divine council, i.e. the gods, became demoted and took on lesser roles as Yahweh's servants, his "host".

This is observed in the Book of Daniel, especially in chapter 7 in Daniel's vision of "The Ancient of Days" (v. 9). In his vision he sees the "Ancient of Days" (Yahweh) amidst a court of 100 million (v. 10). What is interesting to note in this passage is that Yahweh's host are given only a brief mention,

and their role is not explicitly mentioned. Yahweh is given prominence at the expense of the Divine Council.

Further theological reshaping along these lines can be found in texts which reflect an exilic/post-exilic period. In these text one finds that Yahweh becomes a universal god who has control of the nations affairs (cf. Dan. 2:21).

Thus says Yahweh, the King of Israel...

I am the first and I am the last;

Besides me there is no god

Isa. 44:6

To whom then will you compare me,

Or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Isa. 40:25

I am Yahweh, and there is no other

Isa. 45:18

This theme of apparent monotheism in Deutero-Isaiah is most likely a response to the exile. Having been exiled from their home-land, the residence of their national god Yahweh, the Israelites rethought their theology. One of the aspects that came of out of this reshaping was the idea that Yahweh had control of the nations, all of them. He now is a universal deity, and does not exclusively deal with the affairs of Israel. The other nations could be controlled by him and used to executive divine punishment/will. This is how the exile was viewed, i.e. as the will, and punishment, of Yahweh. Israel was not carried into exile because their national god was some-how weaker than the Babylonians' gods, but because it was the will of Yahweh because of Israel's idolatry. Babylon's gods became nothing more than man-made objects (Isa. 46:1-7).

Thompson (1995) labels the post-exilic beliefs of Israel as 'inclusive monotheism'. Yahweh was elevated above all gods, and thus these gods must, in conformity to this, be demoted to positions such as 'angels', 'cherubim', 'seraphim' and other created beings. He further suggests that Israel's 'monotheism' was influenced by Persian ideas of God, and the supreme oneness of such a God.

In conclusion the Divine Council motif has many presentations in the Hebrew Bible, ranging from its use in a context of explicit monotheism, to progressive ideas of national pantheons in which there was a head god, to the final form in which Yahweh reigned supreme at the expense of other national

deities/pantheons, and even at the expense of Israel's other gods who became created creatures of Yahweh i.e. angels, spirits, etc. Looking at the use of the Divine Council motif, one can see that it can be used to support monarchy, and to support a particular prophecy or ideology of a cultus. The way in which the Yahweh-cult viewed the divine council could have been utilised to support the claims of the set-up of the state religion, and the supremacy of the king, as Yahweh himself is a king. In its final form of inclusive monotheism, the Council motif is used in such a way that it promotes Israel as a nation and its god as the Highest. Their theology of Yahweh as the 'only' God puts them basically at the centre of the divine will. Everything that is done is seemingly perceived in relation to Israel. The nations are commanded to bring punishment or blessing on Israel. Israel has thus become the 'chosen people' because it is their God who reigns.

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