

Commenting on the *Shema* Labuschagne adds:

[H]ere we have the comparison of Yahweh with other gods carried to its logical conclusion. He is incomparable and therefore he is the Single One amongst the gods, the Solitary One, without peer, to whom no god is related, with whom no god can be on the same level. . . . We may conclude that the exclusiveness of the confession, 'יהוה אחד', is not the result of monotheistic thought, but the result of Moses' work, as well as Israel's experience in history that Yahweh is incomparable. . . . When Israel, therefore, confesses in the *Shema* that Yahweh, 'our God', is the Single One, she expresses at the same time that she owes undivided loyalty to Him alone, for He is the only One for her. The qualification of Yahweh as 'our God' in the confession is indispensable, for it witnesses the very personal relation between Israel and Yahweh.³⁸²

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that the primary evidence for an intolerant monotheism in the Hebrew Bible is at best inconclusive, and very likely speaks only to the continuity of the monolatrous pre-exilic worldview that embraced a divine council. The evidence offered by those who insist Israelite religion achieved monotheism with the exilic and post-exilic redaction of Deuteronomy and the composition of Deutero-Isaiah should instead be understood as articulating the incomparability of Yahweh. Toward this goal, this chapter raises the issue of the simultaneous presence of affirmations of other gods and claims that “besides (Yahweh), there are no other gods” in Deuteronomy. The discussion then moves to Deutero-Isaiah, where the same phrases occur.

4.1 *Deuteronomy: Monotheism or Monolatry?*

Earlier in this study the divine plurality and inter-relationship of Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 were briefly discussed. We now return to those passages as backdrop for the issues at hand. In Deut 4:19-20 and Deut 32:8-9 one reads:

19 וּפְנֵי־תִשְׂא עֵינֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּרְאִיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַשׁ וְאֶת־הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶת־הַכּוֹכָבִים
כָּל צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנִבְחַתָּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לָהֶם וְעַבַדְתָּם אֲשֶׁר חָלַק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
אֹתָם לְכָל הָעַמִּים תַּחַת כָּל־הַשָּׁמַיִם: 20 וְאֹתְכֶם לָקַח יְהוָה וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתְכֶם
מִכּוּר הַבְּרִזָּל מִמִּצְרַיִם לֵהֵיוֹת לְךָ לְעַם נַחֲלָה כִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and terrible above all that are round about him?" Yahweh is incomparable in the council, and there is no need for a forced distinction between “council” and “retinue.”

³⁸² Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament*, 138, 141. On incomparability as relating to the rhetoric of Deutero-Isaiah, see Walter Strolz, “The Unique One: The Uniqueness of God According to Deutero-Isaiah,” in *Standing Before God: Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher* (New York: Ktav, 1981), 257-266.

19 And when you look up to the heavens and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them and serving them. These Yahweh your God has allotted to the other peoples everywhere under the heaven. 20 But the Lord has taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be to him a people of inheritance, as you are this day.

Deut 32:8-9

8 בְּהִנָּחַל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יַצַּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים
 לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
 9 כִּי חֵלֶק יְהוָה עַמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב חֶבֶל נַחֲלָתוֹ:

Deut 32: (8) When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. (9) Lo, the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.

Deut 32:8a reads בְּהִנָּחַל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם. The object of the infinitive absolute³⁸³ is גּוֹיִם. As Sanders notes, the Hiphil of the verb נָחַל can be “connected both with an *accusativus personae* (the inheriting person; hence, “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”).³⁸⁴ Both options are syntactically possible, but which should be preferred?

The answer is to be found in Deut 32:9: “Lo, the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance” (NIV). Since verse nine clearly presents the nation Jacob/Israel as *being taken* as an allotted (חֵלֶק) inheritance (נַחֲלָה) - note the wordplay on both counts with the Hiphil verb in verse 8) by a divine personage (Yahweh), the parallelism of MT’s verse nine would require “nations” be given as an inheritance to the sons of God by the Most High.

But while the nations are given as an inheritance in Deut 32:8-9, in Deut 4:19-20 a complementary perspective is taken. In 4:19-20 the sun, moon, and stars are considered living beings created by Yahweh,³⁸⁵ and these deities are allotted to the nations:

³⁸³ בְּהִנָּחַל is pointed as a Hiphil infinitive absolute, but should probably be understood as a defective spelling of the infinitive construct: בְּהִנָּחַל (Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 154). This is a minor consideration, for the real point is the relationship of the object “nations” with the Hiphil verb.

³⁸⁴ Sanders, *Provenance of Deuteronomy* 32, 154. See Deut 1:38; 3:28; 21:16; 31:7; Josh 1:6; 1 Sam 2:8; Zech 8:12; and Prov 8:21 for other examples.

³⁸⁵ For Yahweh’s creation of the heavenly host, see Isa 40:25-26; 45:12; Hos 13:4 (LXX); Pss 33:6; 148:1-5; Neh 9:6.

חָלַק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֹתָם לְכָל הָעַמִּים תַּחַת כָּל־הַשָּׁמַיִם. Deut 29:25 (Hebrew) informs us that the

peoples of these nations may worship these gods, since Yahweh allotted them:

וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדָעוּם וְלֹא חָלַק לָהֶם:
For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods that they did not know, that he had not allotted to them.

The effect of the complementary perspective is derisive. The other nations worship creatures, not the creator. The gods that Israel's fathers "knew not" are called devils (שָׂדִים) in Deut 32:16-17 and impotent in 32:37-39. This enslavement to feckless gods came about as the result of the disobedience at Babel (cf. Deut 32:8 and the division of nations). After Yahweh's decision to set aside the nations, he created Israel anew to be his own allotment. The nations and their gods deserve each other.

Many scholars who do recognize the affirmation of divine plurality in Deuteronomy would argue that the succeeding redaction of Deuteronomy has recast the older monolatry in a truly monotheistic framework, pointing to Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:39 as proof, since they declare that "there is none else beside Yahweh." In other words, whatever the *Shema* and Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 meant on their own terms has been subsumed by the monotheistic framework into which they were placed by the later redactor. Adherents of this interpretive perspective appeal to Deutero-Isaiah for support, where the same phrases and others are found. Since Deutero-Isaiah is considered the premier example of exclusivistic monotheism,³⁸⁶ the correlation of these phrases allegedly proves Deuteronomy's references to other gods must be interpreted from the perspective of exclusivistic monotheism.

This explanation assumes that "none else beside" constitutes a denial of existence. The only way to demonstrate that Deuteronomy's affirmation that the other gods were allotted to the nations by Yahweh himself has been "recast" by the hand of an intolerant monotheist would be to discern unambiguously that these gods were in fact imaginary and non-existent. This case depends upon whether the relevant phrases in Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 in fact deny the existence of other gods.

Deut 4:35
אֵתָּה הָרִאשֹׁנָה לְרַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבָדוֹ:

³⁸⁶ Mark S. Smith, *Origins*, 154-155.

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the* God (הוא האלהים); besides him there is no other.

Deut 4:39

וַיִּדְעֶתָ הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתָּ אֶל-לְבָבְךָ כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל
וְעַל-הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד:

Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh, he is *the* God (הוא האלהים) in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

Deut 32:12

יְהוָה בָּדָד יִנְחֵנוּ וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נֹכַר:

The LORD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him.

Deut 32:39

רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי
אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאַחִיָּה מִחַצְתֵּי וְאֲנִי אֲרַפָּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מְצִיל:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

With respect to Deut 4:35, 39, יהוה הוא האלהים is a simple verbless clause with the pronoun emphasizing the subject, but what does it mean that Yahweh is האלהים? Is this a denial of the existence of other gods? The answer can be found in another Dtr passage, 1 Kgs 18:21, where Elijah challenges the crowd at Carmel, “If Yahweh is האלהים, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” Clearly Yahweh’s status as האלהים does not mean that Baal does not exist—only that Yahweh is superior to Baal. Yahweh is *the* God par excellence, or, as Deut 10:17 states, Yahweh is אלהי האלהים, “God of the gods.” To call Yahweh האלהים is to call him unique, not to deny the existence of other gods.

The second half of the statements of Deut 4:35,39 states (מלבדו) אין עוד. The phrase is usually translated, “there is no other (beside him),” and is taken by many scholars to be a denial of the existence of all other gods except Yahweh. There are a number of difficulties with this understanding. As Nathan McDonald notes in his recent work *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism,’* the only consideration of the negative particle אין followed by the adverb עוד with or without the subsequent preposition of excluding sense

(מל־בדו) is that of H. Rechenmacher.³⁸⁷ The first part of Rechenmacher’s study was a linguistic analysis of Hebrew verbless sentences with particles of negation. This first part is concluded by an examination of prepositions and adverbs with an excluding sense, including those found in the verses from Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah under consideration.³⁸⁸ Rechenmacher argues that the examples in Deuteronomy 4 point to exclusivistic monotheism. However, McDonald points to several methodological problems with Rechenmacher’s study.³⁸⁹

First, the above constructions are used in reference to Babylon and Moab in Isa 47:8, 10 and Zeph 2:15. In these instances, these constructions cannot constitute the denial of the existence of other cities and nations.³⁹⁰ Rechenmacher comments only that these uses are “naturally relative,” but he fails to consider that possibility with the verses referring to Yahweh and other gods. Second, McDonald notes, “Rechenmacher assumes, without argument, that עוֹד is exchangeable for a preposition with excluding function and personal suffix.”³⁹¹ However, on two occasions in Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah (Deut 4:35; Isa 45:21) “אִין עוֹד” occurs with an excluding prepositional construction . . . and such an exchange would create a tautologous expression.”³⁹² Third, as McDonald and other scholars have noted, neither the usual temporal sense of adverbial עוֹד (“still, yet”) nor the conjunctive sense (“additionally, also, again”) fit Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:39. If one accepts the list provided in BDB for those texts where עוֹד does not have either of these meanings, one is left with seven occurrences of the adverb, all of which occur in questions or answers to questions. McDonald notes that “in each case, what is being questioned is not the absolute existence of an object, but only if there is an object in a

³⁸⁷ H. Rechenmacher, “*Außer mir gibt es keinen Gott!*” *Eine sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Studie zur Ausschließlichkeitsformel* (ATSAT 49; St. Ottilien, 1997).

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-114, cited in McDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 82.

³⁸⁹ McDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 83.

³⁹⁰ One could also include 1 Kgs 18:1-6 in this discussion. The passage deals with the end of the three-year drought and famine during the career of Elijah. After meeting with Elijah, Ahab calls Obadiah, the steward of his house, and together they decided upon a course of action to find grass to save their remaining horses and mules. After deciding between themselves which districts of the land to search (v. 6a), the text says אַחָאָב הָלַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ אַחֵר לְבַדּוֹ וְעֹבַדְיָהוּ הָלַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ אַחֵר לְבַדּוֹ (“Ahab went one way by himself [לְבַדּוֹ], and Obadiah went another way by himself [לְבַדּוֹ]”). While it may be possible (but strained) to suggest that Obadiah literally went through the land completely unaccompanied in his search, it is preposterous to say that the king of Israel went completely alone—without bodyguards or servants—to look for grass. The point is that לְבַדּוֹ (and by extension מל־בדו) need not refer to complete isolation or solitary presence.

³⁹¹ McDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 83.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

person's immediate domain. . . . In each of the questions what is being asked is whether the one being questioned has an additional [item or] member besides the ones already taken into account."³⁹³

The question for our purposes is, does **אין עוד** function in the same way in the phrase **אין עוד** and the similar phrase **ואפס עוד**? The instances where the subjects are not divine are instructive. In Isa 47:8, 10 Babylon says to herself, **אני ואפסי עוד** ("I am, and there is none else beside me"). The claim is not that she is the only city in the world but that she has no rival. Nineveh makes the identical claim in Zeph 2:15 (**אני ואפסי עוד**). Similarly, where the subject is divine it can coherently be argued that the point of **אין עוד** is not to deny the existence of other gods, but to affirm that Yahweh is unique and the only god for Israel. This fits well with the wording of the *Shema* and the first commandment, where the confession and command imply the existence of other gods.

Deut 32:12

יְהוָה בַּדָּד יִנְחֵנוּ וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נֹכַר:

The LORD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him.

Deut 32:39

רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי

אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאֲחִיָּה מְחַצְתִּי וְאֵין אֲרָפָא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מְצִיל:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Moving on to Deut 32:12, 39, the two key phrases are **אני הוא** followed by **ואין אלהים עמדי**. It is important to observe that the repetition of **אני** (or **אנכי**) and the clause **אני הוא** occurs ten times in Deutero-Isaiah.³⁹⁴ In agreement with Muraoka, who rejects **אני הוא** as a tripartite verbless clause, categorizing it instead as bipartite with repeated element that functions emphatically, what does it mean for Yahweh to declare, "I, even I, am he"? Citing C. H. Williams's monograph on the meaning of this phrase,³⁹⁵ McDonald summarizes the problems with understanding the phrase as a statement of self-existence or divine interchangeability ("translating, 'I am the same'") before agreeing that this phrase and similar phrasings in Deutero-Isaiah amount

³⁹³ Ibid., 84.

³⁹⁴ Isa 41:4; 43:10, 11, 13; 46:4; 48:12, 15; 52:6. They occur together in Isa 43:25 and 51:12.

to the claim that Yahweh is unique and the only truly powerful God who can deliver Israel. As with similar older treatments of pre-exilic Yahwism, this means only that Yahweh is incomparable and the other gods are powerless in comparison.

The second line of Deut 32:39, **וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי**, can either be understood as “there is no God like me,” which would not be a denial of the other gods’ existence, or “there is no god with me.” The latter would parallel Deut 32:12’s phrase, **וְאֵין עִמּוֹ אֵל נֹכַר** (“there was no foreign god with him”). These phrases do not amount to a denial of the existence of other gods.

In the case of Deut 32:12, the notion that, “[T]he LORD alone (**יְהוָה בַּדָּד**) did lead him, and there was no foreign god with him,” cannot be accurately construed as a denial of the existence of other gods. In one Ugaritic text with parallel language Baal says: *’aḥdy d ymlk ‘I ’ilm* (“I alone am the one who can be king over the gods”).³⁹⁶ This is certainly no statement for exclusivistic monotheism at Ugarit, but points to incomparability. Deut 32:12 simply states that when Yahweh executed judgment, no other god assisted him or stood in his way. P. Sanders makes the same point in his monograph on Deut 32 when he states, “In colon 12aB the existence of other gods is not under discussion. The colon just says that YHWH was the only god who made an effort for Israel.”³⁹⁷

With respect to Deut 32:39 Sanders adds, “On the basis of this colon alone it is difficult to decide if it is a claim for the absoluteness of Yahweh (i.e., the existence of other gods is denied), or the incomparability of Yahweh.”³⁹⁸ The solution seems to lie in balancing the colon **וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי** (“there is no god besides me”) with the phrase **וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מַצִּיל** (“there is none that can deliver out of my hand”). As Sanders notes:

How do we translate **עִמָּדִי**? Theoretically 'with', 'beside', and 'like' are our options. In other parts of the song the existence of other gods is not denied but they are regarded as powerless; cf. v. 31, 37-38, 43a (4QDt^d). This circumstance seems to render the translation 'with' less convincing. It is the incomparability [of God] . . . that is confessed here. The phrase **וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי** must have virtually the same meaning as the far more common expression of YHWH's incomparability by the phrase . . . **אֵין כֵּ**. The possibility of translating **עִמָּ** by 'like' is also suggested by some Ugaritic evidence. . . . In *KTU* 1.6:i.44-45 *Ilu* and *Athiratu* are

³⁹⁵ C. H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of 'Ani Hū' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (WUNT II, 113, 2000) 39-52.

³⁹⁶ *KTU* 1.4.vii.49-52.

³⁹⁷ Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 238.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

comparing various candidates for Ba'alu's succession. Ilu rejects one of them, stating:
dq 'anm l yrz 'm b 'lly 'db mrh 'm bn dgn
ktmsm ("One of feeble strength cannot run like Ba'alu, one who knuckles down cannot poise the lance like the son of Daganu"; lines 50-52). Since at this moment Ba'alu is not among the living anymore, the translation 'with' is obviously unacceptable here. It has long been perceived that 'like' is the preferable translation.³⁹⁹

The point above regarding the relationship between Yahweh's incomparability and his *uniqueness* is an important one. The fact that there is no deity who can save those whom Yahweh has targeted for judgment speaks to both aspects. This uniqueness in turn compels the confession that Yahweh alone is the "true" God (Jer 10:10). This is the basis for Israel's monolatry. As one scholar recently noted in a work on the question of monotheism in Deuteronomy:

[T]he belief in one God is the central issue in the theology of Deuteronomy. In later times, the monotheistic statements of Deuteronomy (esp. 4:35, 39; 6:4; 7:9; 32:39) are used by the monotheistic religions of Late Antiquity, Judaism and Christianity, to support their argument against those who did not believe in one God. . . . As far as the belief in one God is concerned, Deuteronomy is not concerned with a theoretical monotheism, but rather gives a confession of faith. The monotheism of Deuteronomy emerged from the struggle against *idolatry*. Moreover, the decline of Israel is attributed to the following of other gods. *The existence of other gods is not denied, however, only their power and significance for Israel.*⁴⁰⁰

The absence of any unmistakable denial of the existence of other gods in Deuteronomy and the Dtr literature is also bolstered by a study of the concept of alien deities in that material by Yair Hoffman.⁴⁰¹

Hoffman studied the occurrence and distribution of the phrases אלהים אחרים, אל זר, and אלהי נכר to discern whether Israel's faith reflected an exclusivistic monotheism, or if such phrases denoted only a difference in perspective ("they are *other* gods since they are not *ours*").⁴⁰²

Based on the infrequent number of occurrences and their distribution, Hoffman concluded the first two phrases could not decisively answer the question. The third phrase, the most relevant to the study, resulted in more clarity. By way of summation, Hoffman found that the phrase אלהים אחרים:

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 238; cf. note 788. On the Ugaritic evidence, see also Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'alu According to the Version of Ilimilku* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer & Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), 203.

⁴⁰⁰ J. T. A. M. van Ruiten, "The Use of Deuteronomy 32:39 in Monotheistic Controversies in Rabbinic Literature," in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honor of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 223 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁰¹ Yair Hoffman, "The Concept of 'Other Gods' in Deuteronomistic Literature," in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature* (ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer; JSOTSup 171; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1994), 66-84.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 71. Emphasis is the author's.

[S]eems to testify that at least among those who used the phrase a certain concept of otherness relating to deity prevailed. . . . אלהים אחרים is certainly an idiomatic phrase, and its distribution proves it to be a Deuteronomistic one: it occurs 59 times (95%) in Dtr and only four times in non-Dtr texts . . . [its] frequent usage indicates that it gained the lexical status of a common term.⁴⁰³

Anticipating the critical response that the study of the phrase could still not shed sufficient light on his questions since the Hebrew Bible lacks sophisticated philosophical vocabulary, Hoffman writes:

Such an argument loses its validity at least in verses in which אלהים אחרים is qualified by clauses such as “which you knew not” and “which neither you nor your parents knew.” Such a clause indicates that since the Dtr felt that the vagueness of אלהים אחרים prevented him from achieving more accuracy, he found a way of making the phrase less equivocal.⁴⁰⁴

Hoffman’s conclusions support the position that the denunciations of other gods in Deuteronomy and the Dtr literature were based on Yahweh’s superiority to other gods, not his lone existence:

The qualifying phrase אשר לא ידעת verifies that by the phrase אלהים אחרים Dtr did not intend a conclusive denial of deities other than Yahweh. . . . I suggest that the creation of the expression אלהים אחרים reflects Dtr’s vague feeling that a term was needed which could express the dichotomy, though not absolute contradistinction, between Yahweh and all other gods. . . . The creation of a term was vital for the Dtr who wanted to contrast other deities with Yahweh not on the level of existence, but on the level of potency.⁴⁰⁵

By way of illustration outside the book of Deuteronomy, Hoffman offers a passage from the Dtr prophet Jeremiah (Jer 2:13), “who juxtaposed Yahweh and other deities using the metaphor of the fountain and the cistern: ‘My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.’”⁴⁰⁶ Jeremiah’s rhetoric in 2:11a (“Has a nation ever changed its gods? [Yet they are not gods at all]”) does not overturn the comparison based on potency with a denial of the existence of the other gods, for 2:11b explains, “But my people have exchanged their Glory for what does not profit.” The point of Jeremiah’s comparison is potency, not existence. Hoffman again comments:

Thus the concept of “other gods” expressed by the term אלהים אחרים is that they exist, they may even be “helpful” for their natural worshippers, but not for Israel, which can be helped only by Yahweh. Such a concept of other gods leads indirectly to the belief that Yahweh is mightier than the other gods, and therefore it is not only immoral but stupid for Israel to transgress his covenant. The concept of the sovereignty of Yahweh over all deities, though not his exclusiveness, and the idea that it is legitimate for each nation to worship its own gods, are well

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 72.

attested in Deut 4:19-20. Here Israel is warned not to worship the sun, the moon, and the stars, “whom the Lord has allotted (חלק) unto all nations under the whole world.”

The confessional statements of Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 must be viewed against the backdrop of the Most High’s dealings with the Gentile nations and the gods he appointed to govern them. It would be nonsensical to conclude that Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 have Yahweh giving the nations up to the governance of non-existent beings. The writer-redactor’s own text is not suggesting in turn that Yahweh allotted non-existent beings to the nations so as to explain why the nations outside Israel worship non-existent beings. The religious outlook of the writer of Deuteronomy was not exclusivistic monotheism but monolatry based on Yahweh's incomparability and his choice of Israel. The theology of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist logically called for Israel’s exclusive worship of Yahweh, the rejection of the worship of other gods, and the removal of rival cult centers, not because the idea that other gods existed was threatening, but because loyalty to any other god was such an abominable response to Yahweh’s choice of Israel.

Immediately preceding the confession of 4:35 the reader sees the linkage between election of Israel as Yahweh's inheritance with his uniqueness. What other god was so powerful as to snatch his own possession from the feckless gods that held sway over the other nations, namely mighty Egypt?

34 או הנסה אלהים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסת באתת
ובמופתים ובמלחמה וביר חזקה ובזרוע נשועה ובמוראים גדלים
ככל אשר עשה לכם יהוה אלהיכם במצרים לעיניך:

Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by tests, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things Yahweh your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

Commenting on this relationship and its place in the Dtr's argumentation in Deuteronomy 4, A. Rofé

states:

If the Lord 'invaded' Egypt and took for himself from there the Israelite people thus revealing his supreme and sovereign power, he has proved by such both his dominion, which is beyond the borders of the traditional concept of 'the land of the Lord' – 'the inheritance of the Lord' – and the impotence of Amon, the God of Egypt, that is, the futility of Egyptian faith in 'a god who cannot save'. The Lord is the God of the universe, and other territorial gods cannot save, that is, cannot act as gods. . . The notion of Israel's election is mentioned here not in order to express any virtue