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The Most Heiser: Yahweh and Elyon in Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32

By *Thom*

Stark

A reader has asked that I respond to [this blog post](#) and to [this article](#) by Michael Heiser on whether Yahweh and Elyon are distinct deities in Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82. In this post I will do so. All text in **black** will be from Michael Heiser's online article, and all text in **red** will be my own commentary.

Introduction

The polytheistic nature of pre-exilic Israelite religion and Israel's gradual evolution toward monotheism are taken as axiomatic in current biblical scholarship. This evolution, according to the consensus view, was achieved through the zealous commitment of Israelite scribes who edited and reworked the Hebrew Bible to reflect emerging monotheism and to compel the laity to embrace the idea. One specific feature of Israelite religion offered as proof of this development is the divine council. Before the exile, Israelite religion affirmed a council of gods which may or may not have been headed by Yahweh. During and after the exile, the gods of the council became angels, mere messengers of Yahweh, who by the end of the exilic period was conceived of as the lone council head over the gods of all nations. Deuteronomy 32:8-9 and Psalm 82 are put forth as rhetorical evidence of this redactional strategy and assumed religious evolution. The argument is put forth that these texts suggest Yahweh was at one time a junior member of the pantheon under El the Most High, but that he has now taken control as king of the gods. Mark S. 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.

The focus of this paper concerns the position expressed by Smith and held by many others: whether Yahweh and El are cast as separate deities in Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32. This paper argues that this consensus view lacks coherence on several points. This position is in part based on the idea that

these passages presume Yahweh and El are separate, in concert with an “older” polytheistic or henotheistic Israelite religion, and that this older theology collapsed in the wake of a monotheistic innovation. The reasoning is that, since it is presumed that such a religious evolution took place, these texts evince some sort of transition to monotheism. The alleged transition is then used in defense of the exegesis. As such, the security of the evolutionary presupposition is where this analysis begins.

This is incorrect. Scholars did not begin with the presupposition that Israel’s monotheism evolved from polytheism, and then came with that presupposition to these (and other) texts. Rather, these (and other) texts display a polytheistic cosmology, and texts like Deuteronomy 32 are argued to be earlier not on theological grounds but on philological grounds. Heiser claims that “the alleged transition is then used in defense of the exegesis.” Heiser never demonstrates the truth of this claim. Smith et al. do not appeal to the “presupposition” in order to justify their exegesis. They do their exegesis, then make their conclusions. Only once their conclusions have been established (as the consensus, which Heiser acknowledges) do they then become presuppositional. This is the way scholarship works.

Backdrop to the problem

In the spirit of going where angels—or perhaps gods in this case—fear to tread, in my dissertation I asked whether this argumentation and the consensus view of Israelite religion it produces were coherent. I came to the position that Israelite religion included a council of gods (מִיְהוָה) and servant angels (מַלְאָכִים) under Yahweh-El from its earliest conceptions well into the Common Era. This conception included the idea that Yahweh was “species unique” in the Israelite mind, and so terms such as henotheism, polytheism, and even monolatry are not sufficiently adequate to label the nature of Israelite religion.

The idea that Yahweh was a “species unique” is fallacious, based on statements that claim there is “no other god like” Yahweh, and the like. But these sorts of statements are replete throughout broader ancient Near Eastern literature and are hyperbolic in nature. They do not imply that the god in question is sui generis. An Assyrian hymn to Shamash states, “You alone are manifest. No one among the gods can rival you.” A Sumerian hymn declares, “Nanshe, your divine powers are not matched by any other divine powers.” A hymn to Amun-Re (who was a conflation of two local deities) praises him with the following:

Unique one, like whom among the gods?
Goodly bull of the Ennead,
Chief of all the gods,
Lord of Truth, Father of the gods,
Who made mankind, who created the flocks,
Lord of what exists, who created the tree of life,
Dogging whose feet are the gods,

As they recognize His Majesty as their Lord,
Lord of fear, rich in terror,
Great in wrathful manifestations, powerful in appearances,
Whose offerings flourish, who made foodstuffs,
Jubilation to you, who made the gods,
Who suspended heaven, who laid down the ground!

You are the Sole One, who made [all] that exists,
One, alone, who made that which is,
From whose two eyes mankind came forth,
On whose mouth the gods came into being,

Father of the fathers of all the gods,
Who suspended heaven, who laid down the ground.
Who made what exists, who created that which is,
Sovereign, — life, prosperity, health! — Chief of the gods.

Hail to you, who made all that exists,
Lord of Truth, Father of the gods,

Singly unique One, without his second . . .

Unique king, like whom among the gods?

Amun, more powerful than all the gods.¹

First, Deutero-Isaiah is hailed as the champion of intolerant monotheism, giving us the first allegedly clear denials of the existence of other gods. And yet it is an easily demonstrated fact that every phrase in Deutero-Isaiah that is taken to deny the existence of other gods has an exact or near exact linguistic parallel in Deuteronomy 4 and 32—two passages which every scholar of Israelite religion, at least to my knowledge, rightly sees as affirming the existence of other gods. Deutero-Isaiah actually puts some of the same denial phrasing into the mouth of personified Babylon in Isaiah 47:8, 10. Should readers conclude that the author has Babylon denying the existence of other cities? Why is it that the same phrases before Deutero-Isaiah speak of the incomparability of Yahweh, but afterward communicate a denial that other gods exist?

This is fallacious. It is *not* the case that “every phrase in Deutero-Isaiah that is taken to deny the existence of other gods has an exact or near linguistic parallel in Deuteronomy 4 and 32.” But Deuteronomy 4 is irrelevant, since it’s from a later period than Deuteronomy 32. Scholars like Rollston and Smith don’t base their argument that Deutero-Isaiah is monotheistic solely on the language which denies other gods. This language is hyperbolic, as Smith rightly notes. Rollston and Smith see Deutero-Isaiah as monotheistic in large part because of the polemic in Isa 44:9-20, which clearly characterizes other gods as merely fashioned by human hands. This takes the rhetoric much further than anything seen in Deuteronomy 32.² The argument is that the standard hyperbolic language

("there is no other god besides me," etc.) came to be read as monotheistic language at this time. The shift is clear from the polemic against other gods as merely the wooden products of human hands.

Second, the rationale for the shift toward intolerant monotheism is supported by appeal to the idea that since Yahweh was once a junior member of the pantheon, the belief in his rulership over the other gods of the nations in a pantheon setting is a late development. The consensus thinking argues that Yahweh assumes a new role as judge over all the world and its gods as Israel emerges from the exile.

This again is not accurate. Rollston, for instance, argues that there is a loose four-stage development, from Yahweh as junior deity, to Yahweh as head of the pantheon (though still subservient to El Elyon), to the conflation of Yahweh with El Elyon, to out and out monotheism. Only the last stage does Rollston place in the exilic period, but Rollston actually argues that this shift to monotheism began with Jeremiah, just prior to the exile. But the middle two stages are much earlier for Rollston, occurring during the monarchical period. There is in fact nothing surprising about this, within a polytheistic framework. After all, the same pattern appears with Baal and with many other ANE deities. A junior member asserts himself and takes the throne as king of the gods, though still subordinate (if only technically) to the high god/s.

This assertion is in conflict with several enthronement psalms that date to well before the exilic period. Psalm 29 is an instructive example. Some scholars date the poetry of this psalm between the 12th and 10th centuries B.C.E.

"Some" scholars may date it as early as the 12th century, but certainly not the vast majority. At any rate, this statement continues the misunderstanding that scholarship dates Yahweh's enthronement to the exilic or post-exilic period. Yahweh's enthronement and monotheism are two separate issues.

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."

Yet Cross himself argued that monotheism was a late development, as Heiser should well know. This displays the fallacy in Heiser's argumentation here.

Lastly, my own work on the divine council in Second Temple period Jewish literature has noted over 170 instances of plural מִיְהוָה or מִיְהוָה in the Qumran material alone. Many of these instances are in the context of a heavenly council. If a divine council of gods had ceased to exist in Israelite religion by the end of the exile, how does one account for these references? The Qumran material and the way it is handled is telling with respect to how hermeneutically entrenched the consensus view has become. As all the scholarly studies on the divine council point out, in terms of council personnel, the מִיְהוָה and מִיְכָלִים were distinguished, but scholars who do draw attention to the Qumran material say that this deity vocabulary now refers to angels. For example, Mark S. Smith asserts that later Israelite monotheism, as represented by Second Isaiah, "reduced and modified the sense of divinity attached to angels" so that words like מִיְהוָה in the Dead Sea Scrolls must refer to mere angels or

heavenly powers “rather than full-fledged deities.” L. Handy also confidently states that “by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls . . . the word מִיְהוָה was used even by contemporary authors to mean ‘messengers,’ or what we call ‘angels,’ when it was not used to refer to Yahweh . . . these מִיְהוָה, previously understood as deities, had come to be understood as angels.”

But why must these terms refer to angels? Whence does this assurance emerge? Why does the same vocabulary mean one thing before the exile but another after? A tagged computer search of the Dead Sea Scrolls database reveals there are no lines from any Qumran text where a “deity class” term (מִיְהוָה / מִיְהוָה) for a member of the heavenly host overlaps with the word מַלְאָכִים, and so the conclusion is not data-driven. In fact, there are only eleven instances in the entire Qumran corpus where these plural deity terms and מַלְאָכִים occur within fifty words of each other. Scholars like C. Newsom, trying to account for the data, refer to these deities as “angelic elim,” a term that is oxymoronic with respect to the tier members of the divine council.

It is difficult to discern what else guides such a conclusion other than the preconception of a certain trajectory toward intolerant monotheism. Such reasoning unfortunately assumes what it seeks to prove. The plural deity words in texts composed after the exile cannot actually express a belief in a council of gods, because that would result in henotheism or polytheism. Rather, the word must mean “angels,” because that would not be henotheism or polytheism. The consensus reconstruction becomes the guiding hermeneutic.

This is totally fallacious, a misrepresentation of the scholarly arguments. It ostensibly displays a lack of familiarity with Qumranic cosmology and ignores the clear evidence from the LXX. The LXX, whose translation predates the Qumran corpora, frequently translates *’ elohim* and its variants, as well as *beney ha-’ elohim*, as *angeloi* (“angels”). LXX Deut 4:19 and 17:3 translate the Hebrew “hosts of heaven” as “ornaments of the sky,” removing the reference to deities. The Hebrew of Ps 97:7 reads, “Let all the gods worship him,” but the LXX translates this, “Let all his *angels* worship him.” Clearly at the time of Qumran the shift had already been made. Moreover, appealing to computer generated word searches to show that *’ elohim* (“gods”) and *malakim* (“messengers”) do not appear together frequently tells us absolutely nothing. In the scrolls, “sons of God” (a technical Semitic term for junior deities of the pantheon) is translated “angels of God” (11Q10 30:5; 4Q180). Moreover, *elim* (gods) is used interchangeably with “Holy Ones,” “Angels,” “Watchers,” etc., throughout the scrolls. Finally, the figure of Melchizedek in the Scrolls is clearly identified as *’ elohim* but also is listed among angelic priestly figures, and may in one place be identified with the archangel Michael. These are but a few examples. It is hardly the case that the interpretation of the data here is being driven by a presupposition. I think this may be true for Heiser, however.

Yahweh and EI, or Yahweh-EI in Psalm 82?

Psalm 82:1 is a focal point for the view that the tiers of the divine council collapsed in later Israelite religion:

God stands in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

Heiser's translation is already misleading. It should read:

'Elohim stands in the council of *'El*
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

We should note first that as late as Qumran, the distinction between *'elohim* and *'el* is clearly maintained, as the former is identified with the angelic figure of Melchizedek, while the latter (*'el*) refers to the God of Israel.

But the scholarly consensus is that originally this text referred to two distinct deities, one identified as *'elohim* (Yahweh) and the other as the high god *'el*. Heiser explains this view:

S. Parker states that, while "there is no question that the occurrences of *'elohim* in verses 1a, 8 refer (as usually in the Elohistic psalter) to Yahweh," and that "most scholars assume that God, that is Yahweh, is presiding over the divine council," Yahweh is actually just "one of the assembled gods under a presiding *El* or Elyon." Parker supports his conclusion by arguing that noting that the verb *בצנ* ("stand") in 82:1 denotes prosecution, not presiding, in legal contexts.

Psalm 82, then, depicts the high god *El* presiding over an assembly of his sons. Yahweh, one of those sons, accuses the others of injustice. His role is prosecutorial, not that of Judge. That role belongs to *El*. The fact that Yahweh is standing, which means he is not the presiding deity, alerts us to Yahweh's inferior status. Continuing with Parker's interpretation of Psalm 82, the accusation that follows in verses 2-5 is uttered by Yahweh, the prosecutorial figure:

"How long will you judge unjustly,
and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*

Render justice to the weak and the fatherless;
vindicate the afflicted and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

They have neither knowledge nor understanding;
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

These charges are immediately followed by the judicial sentencing, also considered to come from Yahweh:

I said, "You are gods,
sons of Elyon, all of you;

nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.”

To this point, Yahweh issues the charge and pronounces the sentence. No explanation is offered as to why, in the scene being created, the presumably seated El does not pronounce the sentence. In this reconstruction of the psalm, El apparently has no real function. He is supposed to be declaring the sentence, but the text does not have him doing so.

This objection ignores the clear parallel to the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. In the Baal Cycle, the high god El who presides over the council has called for a cessation of violence among the gods and intends to crown Yamm (“Sea”)—the god of the chaotic seas—king over all the earth, and to hand over Baal to Yamm as a prisoner according to Yamm’s demand. But Baal rebukes the council of the gods for their cowardice before Yamm. He then defies El’s intentions and takes matters into his own hands, engaging Yamm in combat and defeating him (cf. “you shall die like mortals” in Ps 82:7). Kothar-wa-Hasis, another god who favors Baal, speaks thus:



I say to you, O Prince Baal, I declare O Rider on the clouds:
Now your enemy, O Baal; now your enemy you will kill.
Now you will destroy your adversaries.
Take your eternal kingdom, your dominion forever and ever. . . .
Drive Yamm (Sea) from his throne, Nahar (River) from his seat of dominion. . . .
And the club swoops in the hands of Baal, like an eagle in his fingers
It strikes the skull of Prince Yamm, between the eyes of Judge Nahar
Yamm collapses, he falls to the earth; his joints tremble, his body is spent
Baal draws and drinks Yamm, he finishes off Judge Nahar
Astarte shouted Baal’s name:
“Hail, Baal the Victorious! Hail, Rider on the Clouds!
Yamm is dead! Baal shall reign!”

After this, El conceded to Baal’s ascent to the throne, instead of Yamm. Now let’s look again at Psalm 82:

’Elohim stands in the council of *’El*
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

“How long will you judge unjustly,
and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
Render justice to the weak and the fatherless;
vindicate the afflicted and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

They have neither knowledge nor understanding;
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I said, “You are gods,
sons of Elyon, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.”

Rise up, O ‘E-him, judge the earth;
for you shall inherit the nations!

Thus we see that Heiser’s objection—that El does not issue a judgment here—is irrelevant when the background material is considered. El does not issue a judgment against Yamm, either. In both cases, the young warrior deity (Baal, Yahweh) asserts himself and takes judgment into his own hands, and in both cases, this is how the deity ascends to the throne. El’s silence in Psalm 82 may be reflective of El’s impotence in the face of Yamm in the Baal Cycle. Heiser continues:

At this juncture, Yahweh takes center stage again in the scene. Smith, whose interpretation is similar to Parker’s, notes that, “[A] prophetic voice emerges in verse 8, calling for God (now called ‘elohim) 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.” Parker concurs that after Yahweh announces the fate of the gods, “the psalmist then balances this with an appeal to Yahweh to assume the governance of the world.” Psalm 82:8 reads:

Arise, O God [‘E-him], judge the earth;
for you shall inherit the nations!

Note Parker’s words in the preceding quotation closely. In Psalm 82:8 he has the psalmist appealing to Yahweh, called אֱלֹהִים in the Elohist psalter, to rise up (וַקְהַמ) to assume governance of the world. This is considered the lynchpin to the argument that there are two deities in this passage, but it appears in reality to be the unraveling of that position. If the prophetic voice now pleads for Yahweh to rise up and become king of the nations and their gods, the verb choice (וַקְהַמ; “rise up”) means that, in the council context of the psalm’s imagery, Yahweh had heretofore been seated. It is actually Yahweh who is found in the posture of presiding, not El. El is in fact nowhere present in 82:8. If it is critical to pay close attention to posture in verse 1, then the same should be done in verse 8. Doing

so leads to the opposite conclusion for which Parker argues.

This is a very strained argument. First, there is no question that Yahweh is standing at the beginning of the psalm, and there is no question that this is the posture of the prosecutor, not of the presider. But because Yahweh is later called upon to “arise, judge the earth,” Heiser thinks this means that Yahweh has been seated as the presider—despite the fact that he was standing earlier. Two things to say in response: first, “arise, judge the earth,” does not at all necessarily imply that Yahweh was seated at that time. It could just mean, “Rise up to battle,” “Rise up to the challenge.” Second, Yahweh had finished speaking at this point. Could he not have sat down? Heiser’s argument is the one that entails the contradiction: Yahweh was standing at the beginning; and this is not the posture of the high god who presides over the council. Moreover, it is clear that Yahweh is standing “in the midst of the gods.” He is not presiding *over* the gods. He is one of them.

It is more coherent to have Yahweh as the head of the council in Psalm 82 and performing all the roles in the divine court. The early part of the psalm places Yahweh in the role of accuser; midway he sentences the guilty; finally, the psalmist wants Yahweh to rise and act as the only one who can fix the mess described in the psalm.



I disagree. Not only is Heiser’s reading not *more* coherent, I find it incoherent. On Heiser’s reading, Yahweh is “performing all the roles in the divine court.” But we have no precedent for the high god acting as prosecutor in the divine council motif. We do, however, have precedent (as shown) for a warrior deity with royal aspirations who takes judgment into his own hands, and thus ascends to the throne. As for Yahweh being the “only one who can fix the mess,” the same is true of Baal in the Baal Cycle. Only Baal has the courage to stand up to the gods of chaos and death. The other gods in the council (including the high god El!) simply allow injustice to assert its will. But Baal and Yahweh protest, they kill the gods, and take their place as king over all the earth. Note especially that Ps 82:8 says of Yahweh, “you shall inherit the nations.” This clearly implies that they were not his prior to this point. Deuteronomy 32 is in the background here, in which all the gods receive a portion of the earth as their inheritance. But in Ps 82, this isn’t working out so well, because the gods are lax in their execution of justice. Thus, Yahweh engages in combat against them and takes their inheritances from them as his own.

Heiser writes of his reading:

This alternative is in agreement with early Israelite poetry (Psalm 29:10; Exodus 15:18) that has Yahweh ruling from his seat on the waters above the fixed dome that covers all the nations of the earth and statements in Deuteronomy and First Isaiah that Yahweh is *יהוה לאה* over all the heavens and the earth and all the nations.

There is some confusion here. First, the translation of Ps 29:10 is disputed. It is often rendered, “Yahweh sits upon the flood; Yahweh sits as king forever and ever.” But the preposition *’al* (“on, upon”) is not used here, as it normally is when referring to a king sitting enthroned upon something. As Rüdiger Bartelmus states:

Ps. 29:10 . . . is linguistically much too difficult to be used as evidence for the cosmology of the psalmist, as is often done. The last word has not been spoken concerning the use of *l'el* before *mabbul*: the argument of Begrich cited by many more recent scholars in support of the translation "Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood" is not convincing, for the parallels he cites would have Yahweh sitting *upon* the flood (a meaning also suggested by the frequently cited Ugaritic instances of *yshb l*). Furthermore, it is methodologically dubious to base far-reaching hypotheses on a hapax legomenon, which *mabbul* is in the sense of "flood." Finally, Ps. 29 contains no explicit reference to heaven. Possibly Yahweh's dwelling place is located there analogously to that of El (not Baal) at the site of "the two rivers."³

Another possible translation is that "Yahweh sits enthroned *since* the flood; Yahweh is enthroned forever and ever." A better reading is to understand this as aligning with the storm god motif. Yahweh and Baal were both storm gods. Regardless, the presumption here is that because Heiser's reading of Psalm 82 fits better with his reading of Psalm 29, then that says something positive about his exegesis of the former. This is not a valid assumption.

As for Exod 15:18, I'm not sure why Heiser cites this as an example of Yahweh's being enthroned "on the waters above the fixed dome that covers all the nations of the earth," since the text actually says that he dwells upon a mountain.

As for the numerous texts which state that Yahweh is *'elohim* "over the heavens and the earth and all the nations," those comport perfectly well with the consensus reading of Psalm 82. I do not understand why Heiser thinks this is a point in favor of his reading. Clearly Psalm 82 is a poem which describes how Yahweh came to be king over all the earth. Heiser continues:

It is also in concert with equations of Yahweh and El in the pre-exilic Deuteronomistic material like 2 Samuel 22:32 ("For who is El but Yahweh?").

Once again, Cross, Rollston, and numerous other scholars argue that the enthronement of Yahweh took place during the monarchical period, not the exilic period. Moreover, Yahweh and El were conflated prior to monotheism. This is hardly astonishing. Deities were conflated all the time in the ancient world. Baal eventually totally replaced El, even while initially he and El were distinct, even while Baal became king over the gods. Why is it surprising that we see the same sort of thing taking place in Israel and Judea's theologies? Especially since the texts so clearly indicate that the same sort of thing did take place. All of this has nothing to do with monotheism, of course. In the ancient Near East, gods ascended to thrones, were conflated with high gods, were said to be immeasurably superior to all other gods—this happened all over the place. But none of this amounts to monotheism.

Finally, it fits cohesively with the observation made by Smith elsewhere that the archaeological data shows that Asherah came to be considered the consort of Yahweh by the eighth century B.C.E. To quote Smith, "Asherah, having been a consort of El, would have become Yahweh's consort . . . only if these two gods were identified by this time." This means that El and Yahweh would have been

merged in the high God position in the pantheon by the eighth century B.C.E., begging the question as to why, at least two centuries later, there was a rhetorical need to draw attention to Yahweh as high sovereign.



Once again, this point is irrelevant. Obviously Smith, who *makes the distinction*, understands the distinction between the conflation of El and Yahweh on the one hand and monotheism on the other. Once again, here is the progression: (1) Yahweh as up-and-coming junior deity in the pantheon of El Elyon; (2) Yahweh as enthroned over the nations, yet still distinct from the high god El; (3) Yahweh and El Elyon conflated; (4) monotheism. All of steps 1-3 occurred well before the exile, and Rollston, at least, argues that (4) occurred just prior to the exile as well.

Moreover, not even the concept of a god's dominion over the whole earth necessitates a conflation with the high god/s. For example, in the introduction to the Code of Hammurabi, Marduk is clearly subordinate to the high gods; nevertheless, he is given dominion over the whole earth. This is imperial rhetoric:

When Anu the Sublime, King of the Anunaki, and Bel, the lord of Heaven and earth, who decreed the fate of the land, assigned to Marduk, the over-ruling son of Ea, God of righteousness, dominion over earthly man, and made him great among the Igigi, they called Babylon by his illustrious name, made it great on earth, and founded an everlasting kingdom in it, whose foundations are laid so solidly as those of heaven and earth; then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind.

Thus it is clear that even when Yahweh is described as king over all the earth, this does not mean that he has yet been conflated with the high god El or El Elyon.

Yahweh and El, or Yahweh-El in Deuteronomy 32:8-9?

Ultimately, the notion that El and Yahweh are separate deities in Psalm 82 must garner support from Deuteronomy 32:8-9, which most scholars see as pre-dating and influencing Psalm 82. Deuteronomy 32:8-9 reads:

The importance of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 for the view that Psalm 82 contains hints of an older polytheistic theology where El and Yahweh were separate deities is stated concisely by Smith:

The texts of the LXX and the Dead Sea Scrolls show Israelite polytheism which focuses on the central importance of Yahweh for Israel within the larger scheme of the world; yet this larger scheme provides a place for the other gods of the other nations in the world. Moreover, even if this text is mute about the god who presides over the divine assembly, it does maintain a place for such a god who is not Yahweh. Of course, later tradition would identify the figure of Elyon

with Yahweh, just as many scholars have done. However, the title of Elyon (“Most High”) seems to denote the figure of El, presider par excellence not only at Ugarit but also in Psalm 82.

That the text of LXX and the Dead Sea Scrolls is superior to MT in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is not in dispute [unless you are Richard Hess or an NIV translator, which were originally two separate entities but eventually became conflated into one]. At issue is the notion that the title Elyon in verse 8 must refer to El rather than to Yahweh of verse 9. There are several reasons why separating Yahweh and El here does not appear sound.

First, the literary form of Deuteronomy 32 argues against the idea that Yahweh is not the Most High in the passage. It has long been recognized that a form-critical analysis of Deuteronomy 32 demonstrates the predominance of the lawsuit, or בִּיר pattern. An indictment (32:15-18) is issued against Yahweh’s elect people, Israel, who had abandoned their true Rock (32:5-6; identified as Yahweh in 32:3) and turned to the worship of the other gods who were under Yahweh’s authority. The judge—Yahweh in the text of Deuteronomy 32—then passes judgment (32:19-29).

First, nowhere in Deuteronomy 32 is there any statement that the other gods are “under Yahweh’s authority.” Verse 43 calls upon the other gods to fall prostrate before Yahweh, but not because they are under his authority. Rather it is because of what Yahweh has promised to accomplish, namely, to vindicate his own people Israel against the attacks of their enemies. Thus, when Yahweh does this, he will have proved himself stronger than the other gods, and they will prostrate themselves before him. But there is no indication anywhere that they are under his authority, no indication anywhere that Yahweh presides over the council of the gods.

Second, Yahweh may be acting as judge here, but emphatically not as judge over other gods in the divine council. Rather, Yahweh acts as judge against his own people. This is within Yahweh’s domain, just as it is within the domain of any patron deity to judge his own people. Neither does the fact that Yahweh wages war against Israel’s enemies constitute a picture of Yahweh standing in judgment over other gods. Yahweh is protecting his own people through combat, not presiding in the council. So Heiser’s attempt to portray Yahweh as judge in the broader context of Deuteronomy 32 in order to establish him as the high god Elyon in vv. 8-9 is not successful.

The point is this: as with Psalm 82, the straightforward understanding of the text is that Yahweh is presiding over the lawsuit procedures and heavenly court.

No. In neither Psalm 82 nor Deuteronomy 32 is this the case.

Third, Ugaritic scholars have noted that the title “Most High” is never used of El in the Ugaritic corpus. In point of fact it is Baal, a second-tier deity, who twice receives this title as the ruler of the gods.

This is because Baal *became* the ruler of the gods. Clearly, as the Baal Cycle shows, El originally occupied this position. But there is evidence that El and Elyon were identified elsewhere. For instance, in the Aramaic Sefire I inscriptions (8th century BCE), *ʾl w ʾlyn* (“El w- Elyon”) appears in a list of names. It is unclear how to translate the *waw* (“w”). It could be that the

waw should be translated "and," which would mean that El and Elyon are separate. But the other deities who are listed in tandem are all male deities and their female consorts. This is not the case with El and Elyon. It's more likely that the waw should be understood as a waw explicativum, so that 'l w ' lyn should translate, "El, that is, Elyon" ("El, that is, Most High"). The same use of the waw occurs earlier in line 9 of the same list, with *shmsh wnr* ("Shemesh, that is, Light"). There are also numerous double divine names in the Ugaritic material which are joined by the waw, e.g., *Ktr-w-Hss*, *Mt-w-Shr*, *Qdsh-w-Amrr*.

But the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*

states that

"there is a wide range of evidence to suggest that 'Elyon was a common epithet in the West Semitic region, applied at different times and in different cultures to any god thought to be supreme. One example of the fluidity of this epithet is in its application to the Canaanite deities El and Baal. Although El is nowhere referred to as 'Elyon in the extant Ugaritic literature, numerous attestations, both biblical and extra-biblical, link the two closely."⁴ DDD goes on to cite the Sefire I inscription just discussed, as well as the South Semitic inscriptions, in which a shortened form of 'Elyon regularly applied to El. In the Hebrew Bible, El and Elyon are identified together in several locations, such as Gen 14:18-22; Ps 78:35; Num 24:16; Pss 73:11; 107:11. I would add Psalm 82, in which the gods convened in the council of El are identified as the "sons of Elyon."


That Baal came to be called Elyon is to be expected, since he became the king of the gods. For the same reason Yahweh came to be called Elyon. But Elyon was perfectly appropriate to refer to any high god, and only seems to be applied in the West Semitic region to the god who convenes over the divine council. Baal came to be king of the gods, and thus Elyon was appropriate. But in Deuteronomy 32, Yahweh is not yet in that position. Elyon much more likely refers to the El Elyon of Genesis 14, etc., for reasons we shall discuss below.


The point here is to rebut the argument that the mere occurrence of the term *וילע* certainly points to El in Deuteronomy 32:8-9. Due to the well-established attribution of Baal epithets to Yahweh, the title *וילע* could conceivably point directly to Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8-9.

This is ruled out by other considerations, discussed below.

It is also worth recalling that if Smith is correct that Yahweh and El were merged by the 8th century B. C.E. due to the transfer of Asherah to Yahweh as consort, then a Yahweh-El fusion had occurred before Deuteronomy was composed. Hence it would have been natural for the author of Deuteronomy to have Yahweh as the head of the divine council. Indeed, what point would the Deuteronomist author have had in mind to bring back a Yahweh-El separation that had been rejected two hundred years prior?

As Heiser well knows (and as he has stated in this selfsame article), Deuteronomy 32 is archaic; it was composed long before the broader Deuteronomist corpus. It is incorporated here. But the

question does not concern the synchronic reading. The question concerns the diachronic. One cannot appeal to the synchronic as evidence that the diachronic conforms. 

Fourth, although *וַיִּלֶּע* is paired with El in the Hebrew Bible, as Miller and Elnes point out, it is most often an epithet of Yahweh. Smith and Parker are of course well aware of this, but attribute it to “later tradition,” contending that, in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 the title of Elyon should be associated with El distinct from Yahweh. Again, this would be most curious if Yahweh and El had been fused as early as the eighth century. In this regard, it is interesting that other texts as early as the eighth century speak of Yahweh performing the same deeds credited to *וַיִּלֶּע* in Deuteronomy 32:8-9. For example, Isaiah 10:13 has Yahweh in control of the boundaries (תּוֹלוֹבֵג) of the nations. It appears that the presupposition of an early Yahweh and El separation requires the exegete to argue for “a later tradition” at this point. 

This argument is very confused. Heiser says that distinction between El and Yahweh “would be most curious if Yahweh and El had been fused as early as the eighth century.” He goes on to argue that because other texts from the eighth century speak of Yahweh performing the same deeds credited to Elyon in Deut 32:8-9, this somehow means that Yahweh and Elyon must be identified as one in Deut 32:8-9? Why? Deut 32:8-9 is older than the eighth century, quite a bit older. It is no surprise that after Yahweh and Elyon are conflated, Elyon’s deeds are going to be attributed to Yahweh. This is a wholly unsuccessful argument. However, the one text that Heiser cites to support his claim that texts as early as the eighth century ascribe Elyonic deeds to Yahweh is Isa 10:13. He says that this verse says that Yahweh is “in control of the boundaries of the nations.” Unfortunately, this is not at all a parallel to Deuteronomy 32. In Deuteronomy 32, Elyon sets the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the gods. In Isa 10:13, Yahweh attacks the nations and takes possession of their lands:

By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,
and have plundered their treasures;
like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones.

This text does not ascribe anything like the deeds of Elyon to Yahweh. Elyon establishes the boundaries; Yahweh disregards them and steals them in warfare.

Of course, Deuteronomy 4 (a seventh century text) ascribes Elyon’s deeds to Yahweh, reinterpreting Deuteronomy 32. But this is about a century later. But Isa 10:13 doesn’t even come close. Talk about interpreting the data to fit the presupposition!

Fifth, separating El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 is internally inconsistent within Deuteronomy 32 and Deuteronomy at large. This assertion is demonstrated by the two preceding verses, Deuteronomy 32:6-7. Those two verses attribute no less than five well recognized El epithets to Yahweh, demonstrating that the redactors who fashioned Deuteronomy recognized the union of El

with Yahweh, as one would expect at this point in Israel's religion.

This is false. First, Heiser states that "no less than five El epithets" are applied to Yahweh. In fact, at least two of these supposed five epithets are not epithets applied to Yahweh at all. Let's look at vv. 6-7 before we discuss the proposed El epithets:

(6) Do you thus repay Yahweh,
O foolish and senseless people?
Is not he your father, who created you,
who made you and established you?
(7) Remember the days of old,
consider the years long past;
ask your father, and he will inform you;
your elders, and they will tell you.


I'll quote Heiser in full then examine his claims one by one:

These verses clearly contain elements drawn from ancient descriptions of El and attribute them to Yahweh. At Ugarit El is called "father of mankind" and "Bull El his father, El the king who establishes him." Yahweh is described as the "father" (אֵלִים) who "established you." Yahweh is also the one who "created" Israel (קָנָה) in verse six. The root *qny denoting El as creator is found in the Karatepe inscription's appeal to "El, creator of the earth." At Ugarit the verb occurs in the El epithet, ("creator and lord of the gods"), and Baal calls El "our creator." Genesis 14:19, 22 also attributes this title to El. Deut 32:7 references the יָתוֹמִים וְעֵלְמִים ("ages past") and שְׁתוֹנוֹת יְיָ רַבּוֹת ("the years of many generations") which correspond, respectively, to El's description and title "father of years" at Ugarit.


Now let's examine these claims one by one:


At Ugarit El is called "father of mankind" and "Bull El his father, El the king who establishes him." Yahweh is described as the "father" (אֵלִים) who "established you."

Indeed, El is called "father of mankind," as well as "father of the children of El" (i.e., "father of the gods"). But this is not at all how Yahweh is described in Deut 32:6. Yahweh is described solely as the father of Israel. This is not an insignificant distinction. The second quote from the Baal cycle identifies El as the father of Baal, and states that El sets up Baal as king (this takes place directly after Baal defeats Yamm). Obviously, as the high god, El is identified as the father of humankind and as father of the gods. But this is not how Yahweh is identified in Deuteronomy 32. Nowhere is Yahweh said to be the father of any deity; nowhere is Yahweh said to be the father of humankind in general. Yahweh is only identified as the father of his people Israel. This was not uncommon. In Num 21:29, the Moabite deity Chemosh is pictured as the father of the Moabite people (they are his sons and daughters). This does not mean that an El characteristic is being applied to Chemosh. It just speaks to the special relationship between Chemosh and his own people; that's why we call national deities "patron" deities. The same goes for Yahweh in Deut 32:6. Another Canaanite god, *Hrgb*, a very minor deity, is identified as the "father of hawks." This obviously does not mean an El epithet is

being applied to him. Neither is it the case that an El epithet is applied to Yahweh simply because he is (as should be expected) identified as the patron of his people. That Yahweh “established” Israel simply means that Yahweh established Israel. Nothing more than that is permitted by the text. 

Yahweh is also the one who “created” Israel (בָּרָא) in verse six. The root *qny denoting El as creator is found in the Karatepe inscription’s appeal to “El, creator of the earth.” At Ugarit the verb occurs in the El epithet, (“creator and lord of the gods”), and Baal calls El “our creator.” Genesis 14:19, 22 also attributes this title to El.

Once again, the distinction is obvious. El is identified as the creator of the earth, and the creator of the gods, but Yahweh is identified here only as the creator of Israel. El is also described as the creator of humankind. But not so Yahweh here. The word for “create,” *qanah*, can mean “buy,” “get,” “acquire,” “possess,” as well as “create.” So it may or may not need to be translated “create” here. That it stands in parallel to *asah* (“to make, fashion”) may indicate that it should be translated “create.” But the key point here is that *qanah* does not feature here as an epithet; it is a verb describing Yahweh’s action. Moreover, understand that the notion of “creation” in the ancient Near East has nothing to do with *creation ex nihilo*. The concept refers to shaping, fashioning, or building, out of raw materials. Thus, Yahweh fashioned Israel from Abraham up. He literally created them from Sarah’s barren womb. This has nothing to do with the concept of the creation of the earth or of humankind or of the pantheon of gods, as with the Ugaritic El epithets. 

Deut 32:7 references the יָתוֹם וְעֵמֶל (“ages past”) and שְׁתוֹן יְרֵדוֹתָי (“the years of many generations”) which correspond, respectively, to El’s description and title “father of years” at Ugarit. 

This is entirely spurious. The references in Deut 32:7 to “ages past” and “the years of many generations” have nothing at all to do with the El epithet, “father of years.” Let’s look again at vv. 6-7, this time continuing on to vv. 8-9:

6 Do you thus repay Yahweh,
O foolish and senseless people?
Is not he your father, who created you,
who made you and established you?
7 Remember the days of old,
consider the years long past;
ask your father, and he will inform you;
your elders, and they will tell you.
8 When Elyon gave to the nations their allotted inheritances,
when he divided the sons of Adam,
he established the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of El.
9 Yahweh’s portion was his people,
Jacob, the lot of his allotted inheritance.

What is verse 7 saying? “Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you.” There are no allusions here to any El epithets, no identification of Yahweh as a “father of years,” or even as “aged.”⁵ Verse 7 asks Israel to remember an older tradition, one the young people will have to ask their father and elders about. The old tradition says that when Elyon divided up the earth to give one nation to each of his sons as his inheritance, Yahweh’s inheritance was Israel. What is the point of saying this? Well verse 5 makes it clear: Israel is not being faithful to Yahweh. Vv. 16-17 expound on this: Israel was ungrateful to Yahweh and decided to go after other gods, despite how well Yahweh had treated them. The point of vv. 8-9 is to remind Israel that according to their old traditions, Israel belonged to Yahweh; Israel was Yahweh’s inheritance. They thus had no business looking to other gods for support. The world was rightly ordered by Elyon, and according to the divinely-established world order, Israel belonged to Yahweh. Other people belonged to other gods, but Israel belonged to Yahweh. By worshiping other gods, Israel was kicking against the divinely-established world order.

Thus, v. 7 has nothing to do with any El epithet; it simply and quite clearly asks Israel to recall an older tradition, one the young people might not know about—which may explain their unfaithfulness. And as we have seen, none of the other attempts of Heiser to find El epithets in v. 6 have been successful. They are at best incredibly tenuous connections; but what they really highlight is the great difference between El and Yahweh. El is the father and creator of the gods, of the earth, and of humankind. And this makes perfect sense of Elyon’s function in Deut 32:8-9. But in Deuteronomy 32, Yahweh is only ever identified as father and fashioner of his own allotted people, Israel. This is how all patron deities were understood.

I should add here that it is very clear from the grammar that the noun *nachalah* in v. 9 should be translated “inheritance.” Yahweh receives Israel as his “inheritance” (*nachalah*), just as the other sons of El received their nations as their inheritance (*nachal*, v. 8). With this verb, especially in the Hiphil, the object is always what is being given as an inheritance. Thus, Israel is given to Yahweh as his inheritance.⁶ It would make no sense for Elyon to give himself an inheritance. Moreover, as I’ve argued elsewhere, it is not just the Gentile nations that are divided up according to the number of the sons of El. It is all of humankind, i.e., “the sons of Adam.” This clearly includes Israel. And the sons of Adam are not divided up according to the number of the sons of El, plus one (i.e., plus Elyon). They are divided up, according to the text, solely according to the number of the sons of El. Thus, that Yahweh receives Israel as his inheritance makes Yahweh one of the sons of El mentioned in v. 8. Any other construal of the text would constitute its rewriting.

Since the El epithets of Deuteronomy 32:6-7 are well known to scholars of Israelite religion, those who argue that Yahweh and El are separate deities in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 are left to explain why the redactor of verses 6-7 would unite Yahweh and El and in the next stroke separate them. Those who crafted the text of Deuteronomy 32 would have either expressed diametrically oppositional views of Yahweh’s status in consecutive verses, or have allowed a presumed original separation of Yahweh and El to stand in the text—while adding verses 6-7 in which the names describe a single deity.

Either that, or the argument that vv. 6-7 apply El epithets to Yahweh is mistaken, as I've argued.

It is difficult to believe that the scribes were this careless, unskilled, or confused. If they were at all motivated by an intolerant monotheism one would expect this potential confusion to have been quickly removed.

I do not argue that the composer of the song was motivated by an intolerant monotheism. Intolerant monotheism did not come until much later, as the entire song is archaic, with vv. 8-9 being even older still. I do not even attribute monotheism to a Deuteronomistic redactor in the seventh century. However, I would affirm that by this time, Yahweh and Elyon were conflated. Nevertheless, this does not entail that the Deuteronomistic redactor would have felt the need to alter the text in vv. 8-9, nor would it entail that he was stupid or confused for allowing it to stand. There are numerous contradictions (ideological, theological and otherwise) throughout the Deuteronomistic corpus. Either the Deuteronomist was stupid (which I do not think is the case), or the Deuteronomist was by and large unconcerned to smooth everything out. They did not share our modern sensibilities. Moreover, they had reading strategies which do not align with the historical-grammatical reading strategies of modern critics, and that is sufficient. This text no doubt would have been read synchronically. Deut 4:19-20 is a clear attempt to reframe the interpretation of Deut 32:8-9. That would be sufficient for his purposes.

Last, but not least in importance, the idea of Yahweh receiving Israel as his allotted nation from his Father El is internally inconsistent in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 4:19-20, a passage recognized by all who comment on these issues as an explicit parallel to 32:8-9, the text informs us that it was Yahweh who "allotted" (חלק) the nations to the host of heaven and who "took" (לקח) Israel as his own inheritance (cf. Deuteronomy 9:26, 29; 29:25). Neither the verb forms nor the ideas are passive. Israel was not given to Yahweh by El, which is the picture that scholars who separate El and Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32 want to fashion. In view of the close relationship of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 to Deuteronomy 4:19-20, it is more consistent to have Yahweh taking Israel for his own terrestrial allotment by sovereign act as Lord of the council.

This argument is unsuccessful. Absolutely no one disputes that Deut 4:19-20 identifies Yahweh as the one who divided the nations. Once again, Heiser is attempting to use the synchronic reading to force the diachronic reading into conformity. This is bad exegesis, and a bit of sleight of hand. As Heiser knows, Deuteronomy 32 is much older than Deuteronomy 4. The latter represents a clear attempt to reinterpret the former. And contrary to Heiser's unsubstantiated claim, Yahweh is not depicted as the "Lord of the council" in Deuteronomy 32.

Before I conclude, I'd like to add two small notes. First, Heiser's claim that the evolutionary model is a modern presupposition imposed upon the text is false. His attempts to argue that it is necessary for scholars to do this in order to arrive at the consensus readings of Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82 have been unsuccessful. Rather, the conclusions of the consensus are data driven. Moreover, this is hardly a model that we moderns have just invented for Israel. As is clear from just a cursory glance at the

comparative ancient Near Eastern literature, the evolution of deities from junior gods to high gods is not a phenomenon unique to Israel. Baal began as a junior member of El's pantheon, but over time, Baal evolved, until eventually Baal came to be seen as creator god and as high god. Baal displaced El in Canaanite mythology. It is not at all surprising to see the same thing happening with Yahweh and El, in the same region, during the same period. It would be more surprising were this not the case. But the data clearly indicate that it is.



Second, a word about Richard Bauckham's attempt to dispense with the consensus reading of Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82. He says that Yahweh and Elyon are one distinct and unique deity, and that the other gods are not really gods at all. To argue against a separation of Elyon and Yahweh in Deut 32:8-9, Bauckham writes, "it is hard to believe that, in its present context in Deuteronomy 32, it could ever have been read in this way (cf. YHWH's words in 32:39, which hardly leave room for his subordination to another god)."⁷

This is a very poor argument. Verse 39 reads:

See now that I, even I, am he;
there is no god besides me.
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and no one can deliver from my hand.

Not even Heiser would make this argument; in fact, Heiser himself has refuted this argument. "There is none besides me" is an idiom, and it is hyperbolic. It does not deny the existence of other gods, but is a statement of superiority. But does this mean that there are no gods at all who are superior? No, this is the hyperbole of a warrior deity directed at his peers. We've already looked at some examples of this hyperbole. Let's look at them again:

An Assyrian hymn to Shamash: "You alone are manifest. No one among the gods can rival you." Does this mean that Shamash was the high god, that there were no gods above Shamash? No, it does not. Shamash was the son of the moon-god Nannar, and was frequently described as subservient to the moon-god Sin.

A Sumerian hymn speaks to the goddess: "Nanshe, your divine powers are not matched by any other divine powers." Does this mean that Nanshe was the high goddess, that there were no gods above her? No, it does not. Nanshe was the daughter of Enki, the high god. In Sumerian mythology, as with Ugaritic, Israelite, Babylonian, and others, in the ancient past, the high god (Enki, in this case) divided up the world and assigned his children certain domains. Nanshe was given a limited domain (the modern Persian Gulf) and was tasked with maintaining social justice there. This is exactly what we see in Deuteronomy 32 with Yahweh. Yahweh is given a limited domain (Israel) and is given authority over his people, to punish them, as well as to protect and defend them against foreign enemies. That Yahweh, like Nanshe, is said to have incomparable divine power does not mean that he is not subordinate to the high god who gave him his domain. It is also of note that Nanshe, like

Baal, Yahweh, and so many other deities, evolved over time. Her domain increased, and she was promoted in the pantheon (although she never became the high goddess).

Regarding Psalm 82, Bauckham thinks that “the idea of a real kinship of nature between ‘the Most High’ and his ‘sons,’ the gods, is already contradicted by the former’s judgment that the latter ‘will die like humans’ (Ps. 82:7). The strong impulse to draw an absolute distinction of kind between YHWH and all other reality, characteristic of Second Temple Judaism, is here already at work, despite the use of the very old terminology that was not designed to express that.”⁸

This again is a very poor argument that misunderstands the nature of the material. First, note that Bauckham simply assumes that it is “the Most High” who judges that the sons of El will die like humans. In fact, it is not; it is Yahweh who states this, not Elyon. Second, and more importantly, the idea that the death of gods denotes a difference in kind is untenable. Recall again the Baal Cycle, where Baal takes on the gods Yamm and Mot. Yamm expressly identifies El as “my father.” There is no question that in the Ugaritic material, the sons of El were conceived as literal progeny. Nevertheless, Baal proceeds to kill Yamm in combat. That Yahweh threatens to kill the gods of other nations, then, in nowise means that there is some difference in “kind” between Elyon and his sons.

In conclusion, therefore, I think it is clear that in this case, those who are bringing foreign and anachronistic presuppositions to the text, presuppositions which hinder sound exegesis, are not those who argue for an evolution in Israel’s theology.

1. My thanks to Dan McClellan for these references. [\[BACK\]](#)
2. See Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 191-93. [\[BACK\]](#)
3. TDOT XV, 214. [\[BACK\]](#)
4. “Elyon,” *DDD*, 295. [\[BACK\]](#)
5. There’s a good reason why Yahweh is not here described as “aged.” As my former Hebrew professor, Jason Bembry, argues in his Harvard dissertation, *YHWH’S Coming of Age* (now published by Eisenbrauns), Yahweh began as a young warrior deity in Israel’s mythology, and did not become the “ancient of days” until the second century BCE, with Daniel 7. [\[BACK\]](#)
6. Here I’m indebted to Dan McClellan. [\[BACK\]](#)
7. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 112. [\[BACK\]](#)
8. *Ibid.*, 119. [\[BACK\]](#)

This post was written by



Thom Stark – who has written 61 posts on [Religion at the Margins](#).

Thom Stark is the author of *The Human*



*Faces of God: What
Scripture Reveals
When It Gets God
Wrong (and Why*

Inerrancy Tries To Hide

It). Thom was a Fig Tree and Ledbetter scholar at Emmanuel School of Religion, A Graduate Seminary. He is a member of several professional societies, including the American Academy of Religion, the American Historical Association, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and the Society of Biblical Literature. Thom has lectured on Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism, Christian origins, the Parables of Jesus, and early Christological controversies.

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<http://brianmetzger.blogspot.com/> Brian M

So is this about two different takes on the material or is this once again coming from the need to demonstrate that the O.T. was inerrant? Is he really opposing the evolution idea on the basis of this text or because a polytheistic Israel is unacceptable? I'm no scholar but from a simple reading it seems Heiser has to work much harder, and ask us to do the same, in order to arrive at his conclusion. Which leads me to wonder why it's so important?

Paige

Thanks Thom! I feel like I'm getting a better grasp of the arguments after reading this. It was very helpful. I'm glad I stumbled upon you as you're a great resource (and you're very thorough).

<http://thomstark.net> Thom Stark

Brian, I won't speculate as to Heiser's motives, but I will point you to the institutional logo at the top of his essay, linked at the beginning of this post.

Paige, very happy to help!

http://www.amazon.com/Christian-Delusion-Why-Faith-Fails/dp/1616141689/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1310843216&sr=8-1 Ed Babinski

For further parallels between OT representations of "God" and those of high moral henotheistic gods of the ANE see my chapter, "The Cosmology of the Bible," in this book: http://www.amazon.com/Christian-Delusion-Why-Faith-Fails/dp/1616141689/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1310843216&sr=8-1 Use Amazon's "LOOK INSIDE" feature to read pages 116-118 where a lot of the parallels are concentrated. But there's other parallels pointed out throughout the rest of the chapter whose pages might unfortunately be restricted viewing. Still, anyone with a free amazon.com account should be able to view those pages.

http://dburnett.com David Burnett

Enjoyed your post, stimulating. I've enjoyed Heiser's work and friendship for a few years now and like where he's going with much of it. The question as to whether "sui generis" is the right terminology to use may be still remain, but Heiser's point I think is correct. He is well aware of the other texts you sighted demonstrating the incomparability. The statement that each of these texts use of incomparability language, including the biblical ones, is merely hyperbolic may be an oversimplification and possibly a unfaithful to the ancient authors' intent in stating it the way they did. It seems as though each of these cultures genuinely believe their tribal deity is legitimately "elyon". So for Heiser to say that ancient Israelites had, as he puts it, "the idea that Yahweh was "species unique" in the Israelite mind" would seem like an adequate articulation to me. Simply citing other primary sources with similar language isn't enough to deem it "fallacious".

http://thomstark.net Thom Stark

Thanks for your comments. I do continue to find Heiser's reasoning fallacious, and I think you're missing an element of the argument I made. I did not merely cite the sources and assert they were merely hyperbolic. As I discussed toward the end, the incomparability language is applied to gods who are clearly still subordinate to other deities, higher gods, or their progenitors.

For instance, I mentioned that Shamash, while said to be without rival among the gods, is clearly subordinate to Sin, not to mention his mother Nannar. The same is true of Nanshe. Here is the text I cited in broader context:

My lady, your divine powers are mighty powers, surpassing all other divine powers; Nanshe, there are no divine powers matching your powers. An, the king, looks joyfully at you, as you sit with Enlil on the throne-dais where the fates are to be determined. Father Enki determined a fate for you. Nanshe, child born in Eridug, sweet is your praise.

Clearly Nanshe is not superior to Enlil, the king. Neither is she superior to Enki, her father, who "determined a fate" for Nanshe. In other words, Enki is the one who exalted her. She, along with Enlil, determines the fate of humankind, but her own fate is determined by a higher god, her father Enki. She reigns at the top of the second tier, but the higher gods remain in position above her.

Another example is Ishtar. The same hyperbolic language is used for her, but she is clearly

Mike Heiser's response to Thom Stark's Posting ("The Most Heiser...")

Item 1

This is not incorrect. Thom argues that the idea that Israelite religion moved from polytheism to monotheism is made on "philological grounds." For those unfamiliar with the term, "philology" is, for the sake of this paper, basically equivalent to "exegesis"—that is, an examination of features of the text itself. I would ask Thom what those philological grounds are. This is a fundamental question, and one that Thom will be unable to answer. He is not alone. What I mean when I ask for "what grounds" is this: Please show me the features of the text that, *apart from the assumption of an evolution from the start*, self-evidently show this evolution. I would suggest there are none, and my newest paper on this issue, coupled with this response, make that evident. Put even more directly, there is nothing in the texts themselves that show an evolution from polytheism to monotheism. Rather, the argument is made (contrary to Thom's first objection) by looking at features of the text and then interpreting them to point to an evolution. Here are some examples that will get fleshed out as we go:

1. Deut 32:8-9's use of Elyon and Yahweh. Nothing in the text *says* they were different deities. The argument is made on two primary trajectories:
 - (a) That Deut 32:8-9 are older than Deut 4:19-20 (see my paper for why Deut 4:19-20 is argued as later). I would agree that it is likely that Deut 32 is older than Deut 4 – there *are* philological markers for that. But anyone who knows anything about the difficulty of dating texts via morphology and other philological markers will tell you just that – there is evidence pointing in different directions in any given passage. But let's go with it for now – Deut 32 is older than Deut 4.
 - (b) That Deut 4 is to be dated *after the exile*. I would disagree with this; there is nothing in the text that makes this evident – BUT this is a crucial idea for the evolutionary view, since Israel's presumed polytheism needs some point in Israel's history. That point is posited as the exile or shortly after the exile. Israel's response to exile is considered the impetus for the leap to monotheism. But I challenge Thom, or anyone else, show me why Deut 4 *must* be exilic or post-exilic – AS OPPOSED TO merely later than Deut 32. I

am on firm ground with other scholars (Frank Moore Cross of Harvard for example) in placing Deut 4 *late* in the PRE-exilic period.

These points will make little sense here to the reader. Please read my 2011 ETS paper on this topic, and the importance of this distinction will become clear.

2. Interpreting Psalm 82 as having both Yahweh and El (Elyon) as characters. There is nothing actually **stated in the text** (you need the text for philology to happen, Thom) that has both as characters. This idea is read into the text based on two items:
 - (a) The idea that Psalm 82 is a courtroom scene (“lawsuit genre”), in which there is a judge and a prosecutor figure. I would agree with this genre classification, but there is nothing self-evident in the text that has Yahweh and El (Elyon) *as distinct characters*. See “b” below.
 - (b) The idea that Psalm 82 is exilic or post-exilic (for the same necessary reasons noted above in 1-b). But if we want Psalm 82 to be exilic or post-exilic, then its writer and editors would have to split Yahweh and El, since by all accounts (cf. Mark Smith here, among others) Yahweh and El had been identified with each other as early as the 8th century BC, two centuries before the exile. But I ask Thom – where are Yahweh and El re-divided in Psalm 82? Point to the verse, please. Actually, this has to be *read into* the scene, something that Thom is objecting to in his response at this point. And so I ask: Thom, where is the philological point in the text – minus the assumption of an evolution – that separates Yahweh and Elyon in Psalm 82, in defiance or reversal of two centuries of Israelite thinking?

So, for Thom, by way of summation, you object that I am wrong in saying that this evolution is read into the text from the get-go, arguing that it is based on philology. Please produce the philology, divorced as it is from the evolutionary assumption.

What readers will discover is that this is an impossible task. There is nothing in the text that, devoid of certain assumptions, will self-evidently **yield** the evolution I criticize, or the separations between Yahweh and Elyon that are the critical points to this idea. In today's world of scholarship on Israelite religion, basically everyone DOES begin with this presupposition. I object to it because I see its circularity, and want something that

isn't circular. I am about philology (i.e., text-driven arguments), not assumptions. I would invite readers to read through my most recent paper on the topic (www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETSmonotheism.pdf).

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Item 2

Thom doesn't understand my argument here, but that isn't completely his fault. I do *not* believe Yahweh is species unique *based on denial statements*. I believe that the denial statements ought to be understood as incomparability statements, not denials of the existence of other elohim. I further believe that Yahweh is described with words, phrases, longer descriptors, etc., *with which other elohim are not described, nor would be described, by the biblical writers*. That second idea is really the basis for the “species unique” idea, not the denial statements. That may not have been clear, so I give Thom a pass on that point.

However, I would challenge Thom with the basis of my species uniqueness idea. Here is what Thom needs to demonstrate to overturn this idea:

Show me textual examples (back to philology!) where *the biblical writers* describe another deity besides the God of Israel as the creator, the ultimate sovereign, the lone object of legitimate worship (“Israelite orthodoxy”), that sort of thing. These are identifiers of uniqueness. If only the God of Israel is described this way, then that makes my point. Of course, some will say, “well, the Israelites came to see things this way, but at other points in their history, they didn’t think this way.” Fair enough – show me the texts for that. Where are the other *legitimized* cults of other deities in the mind of *the biblical writers*? Who are the other deities that exist outside the creation of the heaven and earth they made? Inquiring minds want to know.

Note that my emphasis here is the biblical writers. My position has always been that there was a good deal of theological diversity (including polytheism) among Israelites living hither and yon in the deserts, hill country, coastal plains, etc. – but not with respect to the biblical writers. Archaeology shows us that well enough. But it is logically fallacious to superimpose archaeology on the biblical writers when the biblical writers reject such ideas. This “hermeneutic of suspicion” operates on assumptions, assumptions that are then brought to the text to make the text agree. I am interested only in items derived from the text that yield XYZ fact without and apart from any imposed interpretive grid. I reject that approach within the church, and I reject it outside as well. This is why I titled my blog “the Naked Bible”; I could care less about creeds and doctrinal statements (I’m not antagonistic to them, just apathetic toward them). Thom seeks to have rejected such things as well, but then adopted a new set of

dogma from the academy. Thom, on a personal note, you would do well to remember that methods and conclusions are two different things. This is a point you stumble over later in your critique of my article, failing to see the distinction. But I think you and I would share some irritations with the way things are in the “believing” church. We just would not share many conclusions or solutions. (I suspect anyway).

So, for Thom, by way of summation, I would like to see (and I’m sure readers would as well) data from the text that answers the above – proof that the biblical writers could embrace the idea that other gods were commensurate with Yahweh, drawn right from the biblical text.

BACK

Item 3

Sorry, but that is the case. How did my dissertation readers miss this, Thom? Perhaps they needed to consult you. At any rate, some weren't in agreement with my view, but could not refute it (there was this thing called my dissertation defense – that would have been the place to nail me on something so presumably evident).

Thom states in this regard: “This language is hyperbolic, as Smith rightly notes. Rollston and Smith see Deutero-Isaiah as monotheistic in large part because of the polemic in Isa 44:9-20, which clearly characterizes other gods as merely fashioned by human hands. This takes the rhetoric much further than anything seen in Deuteronomy 32.”

This shows less-than-clear thinking in several respects.

First, does Thom *really* want to say that ancient Semites didn't actually believe in other *elohim*? Thom wants his readers to think that after the exile the Israelites abandoned this idea, having leaped to the intellectual echelon of monotheism (defined as the idea that only one god exists). But why, then, do we have 200 references to *elim* and plural *elohim* in the Dead Sea Scrolls (many in the context of a divine council). I guess they didn't get the memo.

Second, on this hyperbole idea – does Thom really want to say that ancient Semites are exaggerating in their belief that their god was incomparable? (They can't be guilty of hyperbole that only one god exists for Thom, since that is what he wants them to be affirming). So, let me see if I understand. The same people who believe the earth was round and flat, that celestial bodies might be deities or powered by deities (a later Jewish view), or the residence of deities (another later Jewish view), and who thought the seat of intellect was their intestines, or that one's ancestors lived in the loins of their fathers, etc., etc. – THAT same bunch would not really believe their god was the best and incomparable?

Huh?

On what grounds is this language an exaggeration? Don't quote me someone who agrees with you – give me the evidence from the text. You are the one who wants

philology, so let's have some on this point. What gives you as a modern intellectual the right to impose your own skeptical dismissal in this regard on an ancient Semite?

Back to my dissertation, I asked in its pages (and at my defense, with my professorial reviewers all present), WHY is it that the language of denial is hyperbole in pre-exilic texts, but when we see the same phrases after the exile, then they deny the existence of other gods? I doubt you can explain this since my reviewers could not. It sounded odd to them because they had the evolutionary template guiding their thinking on it – but that was ALL they had. If they had more, I would have been asked to re-submit the dissertation.

Note: This issue was what actually led me to my dissertation topic. At a Second Isaiah seminar at the UW-Madison, I asked our special speaker, Peter Machinist from Harvard, an expert on Second Isaiah, this question: “If the evolution toward monotheism and the denial of the existence of other gods is so clear, why is it that Second Isaiah, writing after the exile, still had traces of the divine council, and the material from Qumran had over a hundred references to other gods along with divine council scenes?” His answer? “That’s a very good question; I’m not sure.” I knew I had my topic – and what a blessing that he was so honest. This was a wonderful thing to experience—a scholar at such a high level in the profession (department chair at Harvard) being so forthright. I’m not saying he would be won over to my view, but I am saying that he *knew* there was a problem here (who knows?) and that the textual material was *not* self-evident in this regard.

BACK

Item 4

Yes, it is. On what textual basis does Rollston argue for the four stages? I'll tell you -- on the basis of the interpretations that have been canonized by the scholarly guild. This evolution is not self-evident in the text (see # 1, and I would ask Dr. Rollston the same questions, along with those posed in my paper or dissertation).

In short, show me the textual evidence that does not depend on these presuppositions. In other words, when the evolutionary assumptions are stripped away, the text alone should show us this evolution. With respect to Deut 32 and Psa 82, I would ask my opponents to produce that naked material and answer the content of my most recent paper.

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Item 5

This is probably the most disturbing part of Thom's response, because it stands upon hopelessly flawed logic.

Incredibly, Thom assume that, because I utilize an observation made by a particular scholar, that *I must draw the same conclusion as that scholar*. How is that even close to coherent? Scientists and scholars (and just plain-old good thinking "normal" people) use sound observations from a spectrum of resources and then draw different conclusions every day of the year. I shudder to think how science would work if scientists were forced to draw the same conclusions from the same data or the same conclusions drawn by other scientists. I think that's a fine way of describing the mind in atrophy. This is utterly incoherent. Of course I might draw different conclusions using the work of scholars who have gone before me – it's called research and (better) *thinking*.

BACK

Item 6

This objection is also irritating, though it blurs into amusing. Thom doesn't like the fact that I have found so many instances of plural elim and elohim in the Qumran material, since that mars the neat evolutionary trajectory. So what does he do? Does he conduct his own search to prove that mine was wrong? No. Instead he starts talking about Greek and tries to argue that the LXX is earlier than the Qumran material. Setting aside the fact that the LXX cannot be dated with that sort of precision in many cases, Thom, the argument you use here is an argument in FAVOR of what I am saying. But I guess I need to explain that.

I am saying that the idea of an evolution from polytheism to monotheism (denial of other gods' existence) from before the exile, through the exile, and after the exile (ending with militant monotheism) is incoherent since there are many references to plural elohim well after the exile. (At least that is one reason it is incoherent – the entire question about a need to evolve to monotheism is specious – see my paper). Thom thinks that because earlier (Hellenistic) Jews began using the term “angel” in place of “gods” prior to Qumran that somehow explains (?) the abundant use of elohim language at Qumran. Think about that for a moment. How does it help Thom? It doesn't. If the “earlier” LXX (Septuagint) Jews “had it right” by Thom's thinking, then the guys at Qumran are rejecting this – they are not following suit. Thus my question is still valid – why didn't they get the memo? The answer is that there was no “we have now arrived at monotheism and will deny other gods exist” memo to be gotten. That is something modern scholars have constructed.

Thom actually misunderstands what is going on in LXX, too, The LXX is actually *uneven* when it comes to translating elohim. Sometimes it opts for angels; sometimes it retains plural gods - *theoi* or *uioi theou* (“sons of God”). LXX is not consistent in this regard, and so its use of *aggelos* as an argument for a monotheistic apex is incoherent. That there was no apex is shown by the fact some LXX translators didn't care about writing plural gods (*theoi*). It didn't faze them. My findings stand as they are. There are 200 references in the sectarian literature of Qumran (Hebrew, not Greek) of plural elim and elohim, many of them in divine council contexts. Like Mark Smith likes to humorously say, "I don't write these things; I just study them." Readers can get my regional SBL paper on divine plurality in Qumran texts at:

www.thedivinecouncil.com/DSSelohim.pdf.

Lastly, I should note that I am coming to the point (still thinking about it) that for Hellenistic contexts *aggelos* was an umbrella term for “any being from the disembodied spiritual realm – a “messenger” from that realm) just like *elohim* actually means (see my recent paper). *Elohim* is not to be connected with attribute ontology. That is the way *we* think about the term, but it isn’t the way the biblical writers used it. If this is the case, the whole “angel” argument falls flat.

BACK

Item 7

See Mike's new ETS paper for addressing this objection (regarding Psalm 82).

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Item 8

Thom somehow thinks Psalm 82 is a repeat of the Baal Cycle. It isn't. The biblical writers are very capable of quoting portions of the Baal cycle when they want to, but that doesn't happen here – unless Thom wants to produce that for us.

Put another way, Thom, where is the evidence that Psalm 82 is intentionally following the Baal cycle? Be careful here! Arguing this too much will get you a surprise you won't want to affirm – see the last note of my recent paper. What's good for Baal is good for Yahweh.

BACK

Item 9

This is again poorly argued. I address this in my most recent paper (see the second half in regard to Psalm 82). I like how Thom says that my objection is totally relevant "when we look at the biblical text." Thom, please produce the *philological* arguments from verse 6 that show a change of speaker. Mind you, don't read the speaker into it; show us how the grammar and syntax give us that change, apart from anything we might want to see there. Grammar and syntax are the stuff that philology is made of, you know.

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Item 10

I actually don't worry about this. it could be Yahweh is seated or not (that is, as you note, "rise up" may be metaphorical). See my most recent paper.

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Item 11

This one takes me by surprise. What an odd argument – Thom defends his view on the basis of a preposition, the most notoriously elastic critters to translate. Very poor. Thom wants to argue that lamed cannot mean "over"? Think about this Thom -- in ancient Israelite cosmology, the flood waters (mabbul) were ON TOP OF the firmament dome (the raqia'), which dome was "heaven" to the ancient Israelite (Gen 1:6-10). The nations are logically UNDER that dome ON THE EARTH. That would mean Yahweh's realm is logically conceived as being OVER the dome. It doesn't matter what preposition is used, Thom. Yahweh's domain is beyond the dome. This is standard pre-scientific cosmology. You are simply confusing the issue and, no doubt, readers, by this sort of sophistry.

BACK

Item 12

This whole paragraph obscures the issues. I don't think Thom realizes how crucial the lateness of global kingship is to the evolutionary view. He certainly doesn't understand how weak the idea for lateness really is. This goes to Psalm 82, and so I refer readers to my most recent paper (second half) for some clarity here.

I love the idea of identifying Yahweh with the storm god, though. Yes, let's do that, Thom. That helps make my case just fine. You'll understand why in view of the last note of my paper.

End of notes; rest are in sticky notes in original Stark document.

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