

In my judgment, it is not difficult to demonstrate that the writers of the Hebrew Bible held a firm, uncompromising belief in Yahweh’s “species-uniqueness” among the other gods assumed to exist. In briefest terms, the statements in the canonical text (poetic or otherwise) inform the reader that, for the biblical writer, Yahweh was an *ʾēlōhîm*, but no other *ʾēlōhîm* was Yahweh—and never was nor could be. This notion allows for the existence of other *ʾēlōhîm* and is more precise than the terms *polytheism* and *henotheism*. It is also more accurate than *monotheism*, though it preserves the element of that conception that is most important to traditional Judaism and Christianity: Yahweh’s solitary “otherness” with respect to all that is—both in heaven and in earth.

At this juncture I would expect Mormon scholars to ask a fair question: on what grounds can this description of species-uniqueness be established? That will be a focus in topic 3, but first I will deal with one more presupposition.

- Presupposition 4: The word *ʾēlōhîm* necessarily speaks of the ontological traits of the God of Israel, thereby tagging the word with “species-exclusivity.”

We have unfortunately become accustomed to talking and writing about the word *ʾēlōhîm* with imprecision. Since the word is often used as a proper noun in the Hebrew Bible, and since we have used a modern term like *monotheism* to define what Israelites believed, letting the text say what it plainly says—that there are multiple *ʾēlōhîm*—has become a painful, fearful experience for evangelicals. This phobia can be (and should be) cured by letting the text of the Hebrew Bible hold sway over our theology.

The facts of the text are straightforward. There are a number of different entities called *ʾēlōhîm* in the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh is an *ʾēlōhîm*; in fact, he is called *hāʾēlōhîm* (“the God”) when compared to other *ʾēlōhîm* (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:35). There are also *ʾēlōhîm* (“sons of the Most High/sons of God”) who are not Yahweh (e.g., Psalm 82:1, 6). Demons (*šēdîm*) are referred to as *ʾēlōhîm* (Deuteronomy 32:17), as are the departed human dead (1 Samuel 28:13). Other than the *malʾāk yhw̄h* (“Angel of Yahweh”), there are no instances where

a *malʾāḱ* is described as ʾēlōhîm, except in the mouth of a pagan king (Daniel 3:25–28), which cannot constitute a sound source of Israelite theology. On no occasion are *malʾāḱîm* described as ʾēlōhîm. The only passage where this might even be possible is Genesis 35:7, read against the backdrop of Jacob's flight from Esau. I will outline various reasons that this option is implausible under the next topic in conjunction with the *malʾāḱ yhw̄h*. Aside from this sole entity, then, *malʾāḱ* is a purely functional term and not a species term. However, if that is the case, it would only mean that some ʾēlōhîm function as messengers, and so we are still talking about ʾēlōhîm despite the absence of a specific reference.³⁸ This would make sense given the table below.

Mormon theology would have us embrace the idea that all ʾēlōhîm are one—that is, sharing the same essence. The fact that a variety of persons or entities are called ʾēlōhîm in the text would be seen as support for this, but I disagree. My understanding of ʾēlōhîm terminology follows, and I will utilize this understanding under the next topic as I address Mormon interpretation of ʾēlōhîm terminology. For this topic, I want to focus on the elasticity of the term ʾēlōhîm and Yahweh's species-uniqueness.

The text informs us that, rather than a species term, ʾēlōhîm is a term that denotes a higher semantic level. In the following table I have tried to illustrate the meaning of ʾēlōhîm on its own terms and by opposition to real entities that are not ʾēlōhîm:

38. Mormons understand gods and angels to be “gradations” of the same species. Barry R. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” review of “Monotheism, Mormonism, and the New Testament Witness,” by Paul Owen, *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 215–58; FARMS materials are available online at farms.byu.edu. I have not seen any biblical evidence from the text that establishes this. I assume it to be a guess at parsing the relationship of nonhuman beings found in the Bible.

Table 1. Beings That Are Real/That Exist

Beings That by Nature Occupy the Earthly Plane of Reality	Beings That by Nature Occupy the Spiritual Plane of Reality
(beings that, when mature, by nature have visible corporeality—e.g., “flesh and bone”)	(beings that by nature do not have visible corporeality, but that may or may not have materiality, depending on whether they are created beings) ³⁹
Terrestrial Life	ʿĒlōhīm
Within the “higher” term one finds “species-differentiation” Plants Animals (some with <i>nepheš</i>) Humans ⁴⁰ (flesh + <i>nepheš</i>)	(Israelite) YHWH-EL ⁴¹ Sons of God ⁴² Demons ⁴³ Human disembodied dead ⁴⁴

39. ʿĒlōhīm is a “plane of reality” term—it denotes a being’s primary or proper (but not necessarily exclusive) “place of residence.” For example, Yahweh is still omnipresent but is frequently spoken of having a throne “somewhere.” Demons seek bodies to possess. The sons of God and the ʿĒlōhīm/angels of Genesis 18–19 took corporeal form. Therefore, ʿĒlōhīm may take on flesh and bone, but their intrinsic nature does not include either. Humans get to see the other side in ecstatic experiences, and the disembodied dead can be contacted and appear on the earthly plane.

40. No human being has any unique quality or attribute that no other human had or has. Hence, there is no division of species or species-uniqueness under the broader term *human*. Though unique (cloning excepted), DNA does not produce another species, only variation within a species.

41. Yahweh is an ʿĒlōhīm, but no other ʿĒlōhīm are Yahweh. Yahweh is *hāʿĒlōhīm*.

42. “Sons” of the Most High = sons of Yahweh, if indeed Yahweh and Elyon are the same, which the text (in my judgment) clearly indicates. These are of lower ontological status than Yahweh since they are created. They also have a lower status in Yahweh’s bureaucracy (cf. the patriarchal or royal house analogy). These “sons” (called so because of their creation) are ʿĒlōhīm, and some (at least) serve Yahweh as messengers (*malʾākīm*). In this way, the three-tiered (some want four) bureaucracy common to divine council discussion is coherent. Lastly, these ʿĒlōhīm may be loyal to Yahweh or fallen. The fact that they are rebellious and evil does not remove them from this reality plane.

43. Demons are of lower ontological status than Yahweh since they are created. If demons originated as described in extracanonical literature such as *1 Enoch* (and they might, since it appears the biblical material on the Rephaim is analogous, with or without an emendation to *nplym* in Ezekiel 32:27), then they are of lower ontological class than the “sons” class above since they would have had a human parent.

44. The disembodied dead exist on the “spiritual plane” (the “other side”) and so are called ʿĒlōhīm. This is quite consistent with the rest of ancient Near Eastern material.

One could object that the idea of “species-uniqueness” is unintelligible with respect to divine beings, perhaps by analogy to the human world. I am human, yet no other human is me, but all humans share the same species status. Hence one can be unique in properties, but *species-uniqueness* is a fallacy. The analogy with humankind is flawed, however, since no such claim as preexistence before all humans is seriously offered. An attribute shared by no other member in the species *by definition* makes that entity species-unique despite any other shared qualities.

To summarize this topic, I wish to stress two important facts: (1) The idea of an evolution in Israelite religion toward monotheism is a commonly held position, but it lacks coherence and explanatory power when it comes to the canonical text and later Jewish material. (2) The idea that El and Yahweh were once separate deities also lacks coherence. It remains to be seen, and likely depends on LDS input, how essential those ideas are to their beliefs. If they are essential, then their foundation lacks the kind of certitude I would think they are seeking.

Topic 3: The Notion of a Godhead in Israelite and Jewish Thought (items A5, A7, B4, B6)

Latter-day Saints accept the idea of a godhead, but one that differs somewhat from traditional Christian orthodoxy. Some statements from LDS scholars are illustrative:

We accept, indeed devoutly affirm, the oneness, the inexpressibly rich unity, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We could even, I suppose, employ the words *Trinity* and *trinitarianism*—as Elder James E. Talmage’s hugely influential 1899 work on *The Articles of Faith* in fact does—though we typically do not. The Bible *testifies* to this important truth; and so, even more explicitly, do the peculiarly Latter-day Saint scriptures. We do not (borrowing a description of polytheism that Paul Owen cites) “postulate different gods to account for different kinds of events.” We simply feel no need to endorse the doctrine of ontological unity worked out, most prominently, at Nicea.⁴⁵

45. Daniel C. Peterson, “Historical Concreteness, or Speculative Abstraction?” *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): xvii; remarks at the debate organized under the