Dissertation Defense
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Dissertation Title: "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature"

Approach and Goals

This dissertation deals with the intersection of three areas of scholarly inquiry related to the study of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism of the Second Temple period:[1] (1) the idea of a pantheon or divine assembly in Israelite religion; (2) the trajectory in New Testament studies of the past twenty years toward establishing distinctly Jewish roots for Christianity's high Christology—the belief that Jesus was God incarnate; and (3) the denunciation of the 2nd Temple period Jewish teaching that there were two powers in heaven by later rabbinical leaders.

Taking the last of these first, twenty-five years ago, rabbinical scholar Alan Segal produced what is still the major work on the idea of two powers in heaven in Jewish thought.[2] Segal argued that the two powers idea was not deemed heretical in Jewish theology until the second century C.E. He carefully traced the roots of the teaching back into the Second Temple era (ca. 200 B.C.E.). Segal was able to establish that the idea's antecedents were in the Hebrew Bible, specifically passages like Dan 7:9ff., Exo 23:20-23, and Exo 15:3. He was unable to discern any coherent religious framework from which these passages and others were conceptually derived. Persian dualism was unacceptable as an explanation since neither of the two powers in heaven were evil. Segal speculated that the divine warrior imagery of the broader ancient near east likely had some relationship. This dissertation argues that Segal's instincts were correct, and bridges the gap between his work and the Hebrew Bible understood in its Canaanite religious context. I suggest that the "original model" for the two powers idea was the role of the vice-regent of the divine council. The paradigm of a high sovereign God (El) who rules heaven and earth *through the agency of a second, appointed god* (Baal) became part of Israelite religion, albeit with some modification. The two powers teaching was a surviving element in Common Era Judaism of the old pre-exilic divine council—and quite an explosive one given the issue of monotheism.

The Jewish category of a "second power in heaven" caught the attention of scholarly specialists in New Testament origins and Second Temple Jewish monotheism since the exaltation of a second power in heaven became the hallmark of Christianity. New Testament scholars were stimulated by the work of Segal and others who followed to search for an explanation for the exaltation of Jesus by a Jewish sect whose adherents were willing to suffer death rather than deny monotheism. How could the early Christians simultaneously affirm monotheism and worship a second power in heaven? If Christianity derived from Judaism, was the exaltation of a second power a departure from Israelite religion? Was there such a structure in Israelite religion and if so, from whence did it derive? Again, the divine council paradigm seemed a natural institution at which to look for answers.

Lastly, the discovery and translation of the tablets of ancient Ugarit in 1929 provided indisputable evidence for a pantheon in pre-exilic Israelite religion. This pantheon, or divine council, is well known to scholars of the Hebrew Bible. All the scholarship to date on the divine council, however, has presupposed that after Israel emerged from exile, the idea of a pantheon of gods headed by Yahweh had been abandoned in favor of an intolerant monotheism. This consensus opinion makes little sense in light of the two powers issue; the plethora of references (approx. 175) in the Qumran material to multiple thrones and plural *elim* / *elohim*, many in the context of a divine council; and the fact that several of the most eloquent witnesses to a divine assembly in the Hebrew Bible are found in exilic and post-exilic material (cf. Dan 7:9ff., Job 1-2; Ps 82). Attempts at explicating the material in light of the assumption of a universally-observed intolerant monotheism have proven inadequate. Artificial categories of heavenly beings (such as Newsom's "angelic *elim*") assume what they seek

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[1] The Second Temple period is dated from the construction of Israel's second temple, ca. 516 B.C.E. to its destruction in 70 C.E.
[2] Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

to prove: that the old council gods were relegated to the status of angels (*ml'km*). References to plural council *elim* / *elohim* in texts composed after the exile allegedly could not express a belief in the pre-exilic divine council, because that would result in henotheism or polytheism. Rather, the word must mean "angels," because that would *not* be henotheism or polytheism.

Questions Raised, Controversies, and Contributions

As this brief description of the areas considered by this study suggests, there were a number of thorny issues raised when tracing interconnections. Three of the more significant follow.

1. *Monotheism or Monolatry?*

There is near universal agreement among biblical scholars that divine plurality was expunged from the sacred text during and after the exile (586 B.C.E. – 539 B.C.E.) by zealous scribes enforcing a new monotheistic innovation, yet this paradigm hardly explains the unambiguous references to divine plurality noted above. Other scholars have consequently suggested that these scribes deliberately used polytheistic ideas as an apologetic for monotheism. This hermeneutic is both confusing and unnecessary. Given the rise of the belief in divine plurality in the Second Temple era, especially the two powers controversy, the alleged effort could be judged a miserable failure. Still others have argued that, in Psalm 82 at least, Yahweh assumes a new role of sovereign god over the nations by sentencing the other gods to death. This approach assumes that Israelite religion before the exile did not include the idea that Yahweh was king over all the earth (and by extension, its gods). However, the belief of Yahweh's kingship over the nations is a prominent feature in the earliest Israelite poetry.[3] As F.M. Cross notes, "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."[4]

This dissertation challenges this consensus view of the development of monotheism in Israelite religion and Judaism by examining late canonical texts of the Hebrew Bible and non-canonical Second Temple period literature to discern whether or not the belief in a divine council that included other gods survived after the exile. I contend that the pre-exilic divine council, considered by all scholars of Israelite religion as monolatrous, survived into the exilic and post-exilic periods all the way into Common Era.

Affirmations and Denials in Light of this Contention

- Unlike the consensus view, which insists that all forms of Judaism held to an intolerant monotheism after the exile, I do not argue that all sects of Judaism accepted divine plurality. Rather, I contend that the evidence demonstrates that some did, and considered this belief as within the bounds of doctrinal acceptability. There is no evidence that the explicit divine plurality evinced at Qumran, for example, was censored or considered heretical.

- I therefore reject the idea that the council of gods disappeared from Israel's faith before the Common Era, or that it was expunged by those who fashioned the final, canonical text. Arguments that the scribes were at times inept, missing references to divine plurality in their monotheistic editorial mission, challenge credulity since there are so many references to divine plurality in late canonical material. Second Temple writers were quite able to draw on the Hebrew canon for their own ideas of divine plurality and the divine council; there was no need to be inventive. Likewise, I argue it cannot be coherently maintained that the scribes used references to divine plurality from pre-exilic material as a way of rhetorically defending or articulating intolerant monotheism. The

[3] The linguistic connection between phrases in Ps 24: 7,10 ("O gates, lift up your heads! Up high, you everlasting doors, so the king of glory may come in!") and lines in the divine council scene of the Baal Cycle[3] has prompted scholars to note the theme of cosmic rule and posit that the psalm may date to either the 12th or 10th century B.C.E. In like manner, Exo 15:18, part of another very early Hebrew poem, contains the line ("Yahweh will reign forever and ever!"), a declaration of Yahweh's global sovereignty.

[4] Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 45, n. 59.

interpretation of Psalm 82 from this perspective is critiqued in the dissertation since this view has recently been defended by notable scholars. The study challenges those who hold this perspective to not only explain its inconsistencies in Psalm 82, but to provide a rationale as to why such rhetorical aims are not present in other late council passages. In short, how do passages like Job 1-2 and Daniel 7 articulate or persuade the reader of intolerant monotheism? The former is a textbook example of pantheon activity, and the latter was determined by Segal to be one of the key passages behind the two powers controversy. In fact, Jewish literature just after the Second Temple period (e.g., 3 Enoch) is even more explicit about a council of gods than its predecessors.

- Any system that accepts the existence of other gods must be called monolatry since intolerant monotheism requires that no gods exist but one. Retention of other divine beings—the plural *elim* / *elohim*—alongside the insistence that only one deity be worshipped can only be explained as monolatry. This is axiomatic in biblical studies, but the prevailing assumption of intolerant monotheism by the end of the exile has compelled scholars to approach the data in ways described above or create false categories for the data. Other than the influence of the modern consensus about monotheism's evolution among biblical scholars, what else prompts scholars to say that before the exile the terms *elim* / *elohim* mean "gods," but after the exile they mean "angels"? I would argue that Judaism did not *uniformly* reject the category of "lesser *elohim*" until the two powers idea was declared heretical (2nd century C.E. according to Segal).

- I also argue, though, that monolatry is insufficient to completely describe what Israel believed about their God. "Monolatry" and "henotheism" typically presuppose ontological equivalency among at least some of the gods of the pantheon who fight for and obtain supreme status. There is no evidence that those who produced and redacted the canonical material of the Hebrew Bible considered Yahweh as a species equal with any god. He is "species unique" and thus the true, incomparable God.[5] Jewish writings from the 2nd Temple period and a bit later make this distinction quite clear by distinguishing Yahweh from the other gods (whose reality is still assumed) by virtue of Yahweh's pre-existence, creation of all other gods, and global sovereignty. He alone is worthy of worship. Nevertheless, even if one describes Israelite and later Jewish religion as "mono-Yahwism" to emphasize this species uniqueness, the inclusion of other gods defies the modern understanding of monotheism. Monolatry appears the most workable term.

2. *Deutero-Isaiah's Worldview*

The consensus view credits Israel's breakthrough to intolerant monotheism and the denial of the existence of other gods to Deutero-Isaiah.[6] This study argues that Deutero-Isaiah's rhetoric does not evince intolerant monotheism but a monolatry consistent with pre-exilic Israelite beliefs in a divine council that included lesser *elohim.* The following reasoning is behind this conclusion:

A. Our understanding of what Deutero-Isaiah believed is obtained only through his writings. There is no archaeological evidence for the denial of the existence of other gods, much less any specific findings that can be considered Deutero-Isaiah's inspiration.[7] There are no external literary witnesses that testify to a removal of the council gods from Israel's religious practices at this time. We have only Deutero-Isaiah's material and contemporary canonical material (which includes many references to other gods and divine vice-regency).

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[5] "Species uniqueness" or "mono-Yahwism" may be the Israelite correspondence to the ancient Near Eastern (first millennium B.C.E.) movement toward centralization or integration of the pantheon into one single deity to whom all other deities are subordinate. In the case of the rise of Marduk in Babylon and Asshur in Assyria, the various gods of the pantheon were seen as in essence one—aspects of the supreme god that acted as his agents or intercessors in the operation of the divine council. As P. Miller has noted, a number of aspects of Israelite religion are explained on analogy to this integrative model, namely Yahweh's peculiar character as mountain god, sky god, national god, and storm god, and the relative absence of combat myth (P. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* [Westminster John Knox, 2000], 26). Yahweh's relationship to the goddess Asherah may also be so explained in this model.

[6] The author of Isaiah 40-55.

[7] The work of Susan Ackerman (*Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth Century Judah* [HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992]) firmly establishes the archaeological support the presence of other gods in Israelite worship in Deutero-Isaiah's day and beyond.

B. The passages in Deutero-Isaiah that are considered denials of the existence of other gods contain various rhetorical phrases that are taken as evidence of intolerant monotheism. These phrases are interchanged within Deutero-Isaiah, allowing us to consider them as synonymous, expressing the same idea about Yahweh and the gods. All of these phrases can be found in pre-exilic material, especially Deuteronomy 4 and 32, two passages acclaimed by scholars of Israelite religion as affirming a monolatrous worldview since they have Yahweh allotting the other nations to the "sons of God"[8] and decreeing that the other nations worship those gods.

Affirmations and Denials in Light of this Contention

- I would contend that we should seek consistency in the final form of the Hebrew canon. The consensus view argues this way when insisting that intolerant monotheism guide interpretation of council terms and motifs after the exile. In light of the problems with this approach, I argue that the consistency is found in a monolatrous outlook. Either we must interpret the passages in Deuteronomy as somehow advancing intolerant monotheism—something that scholars in the field have rejected out of hand for over a century—or else we allow the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah is arguing along the same lines as the author and redactors of Deuteronomy 4 and 32: that Yahweh is incomparable among all other gods. This study contends that when the assumptions of the prevailing view of the evolution toward intolerant monotheism are removed, the latter approach has far greater explanatory power.

- The dating of Deuteronomy 4 and 32 is controversial, particularly since the latter is considered by virtually all scholars to be a composite text. I would suggest the question is irrelevant with regard to this study. If Deuteronomy 4 and 32 are late, this bolsters my position. If they are early, their monolatry would be no surprise. If they are early material woven into a later narrative as some sort of rhetorical device to promote intolerant monotheism, then this raises the following questions:

    - Why did the author-redactors allowed explicit references to divine plurality to remain?
    - Why is their worldview—that the nations other than Israel are governed by the divine princes / gods[9]—promoted by the canonical book of Daniel and other Second Temple literature?
    - Why didn't the author-redactors enforce intolerant monotheism in Deuteronomy in more obvious places—like the *Shema* and the first commandment? Why not simply say that other gods do not exist in the commandments of Deuteronomy 5 as opposed to only forbidding their worship?

- Many scholars who recognize the affirmation of divine plurality in Deuteronomy would argue that the succeeding redaction of Deuteronomy has recast the older monolatry in a truly monotheistic framework, pointing to Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:39 as proof, since they declare that "there is none else beside Yahweh" and that Yahweh is "*the* God" (האלהים). In other words, whatever the *Shema* and Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 meant on their own terms has been subsumed by the monotheistic framework into which they were placed by the later redactor. This explanation assumes that "none else beside" constitutes a denial of existence. But the only way to demonstrate that Deuteronomy's affirmation that the other gods were allotted to the nations by Yahweh himself has been "recast" by the hand of an intolerant monotheist would be to discern unambiguously that these gods were in fact considered imaginary and non-existent. This study argue that the relevant phrases in Deut 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 do not deny the existence of other gods, and so the overlapping denial phrases in Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah are best understood as espousing monolatry.

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[8] Reading with LXX and Qumran, which are recognized by all textual critics as the correct readings.

[9] The vocabulary of the worldview of Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9, where the sons of God are placed over the nations, must be understood in all its variety. These sons of God are "princes" by virtue of their sonship to the high King of the cosmos, and they act as "judges" or "rulers" of their domains. The vocabulary is drawn from Ugarit and Phoenicia and is consistent with the council bureaucracies of those religions. The same vocabulary is found in Second Temple sources, especially Qumran.

- One cannot argue that Deuteronomy's gods are merely idols. Comparing Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 demonstrates that the "host of heaven" of the former are the "sons of God" of the latter. Deut 17:3 and 29:25 make it clear that the host of heaven are the other gods of the nations. This is consistent with Ugaritic terminology and that of other late canonical literature (Job 1-2, esp. 38:7-8). Yahweh is credited with creating all the members of the heavenly host—considered animate beings across ancient Canaan and the Near East—several times (Psa 33:6; Neh 9:6; Psa 148:1-5). Yahweh is never considered to have created idols.

3. *Yahweh's Hypostasis as a Monolatrous Adaptation of the Vice-Regent Council Paradigm*

Baal's vice regency under El is well established, and has provided a paradigm that solved the dilemma of the seeming conflict between El and Baal. It is also well known that Yahweh and Ugaritic El were identified in Israelite religion. Baal therefore emerged as the chief competitor to Yahweh. Biblical authors adapted by attributing Baal epithets and activities to Yahweh. This study argues that while Yahweh ultimately became identified with both El and Baal, the divine council structure was retained in a modified form that was acceptable in a firmly monolatrous religion. Yahweh could not be seen as sharing sovereignty with another god or utilizing a foreign god as his vice regent. The solution was the application of a familiar religious idea in Canaanite religion—divine hypostasis—to the council's bureaucracy in Israel.[10] Hence in pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic Israelite religion, Yahweh's own hypostasis functioned as his vice-regent. The Name theology of the Deuteronomistic School and the Glory of the Priestly tradition are well known examples, but there are others. This study argues that the Angel of Yahweh (מלאך יהוה) should also be considered Yahweh's hypostasis, and perhaps the pre-eminent example, since that angel is specifically said to have the Name in him and is identified with the Glory cloud. The idea of the *name* of the deity representing the presence of a deity is found at Ugarit, where Ashtart is referred to as *šm bʿl* ("name of Baal").[11] The angel of Yahweh plays the role of Yahweh's intercessor and warrior as Baal does with respect to El in the Ugaritic council.

This contribution provides explanatory power to canonical descriptions of Yahweh in human form and hypostatic human forms bearing Baal epithets and which are described with Baal imagery. Whatever the form, the hypostatic vice-regent was no rival since it *was* Yahweh's essence, but still had independent form and function. Hypostatization of Yahweh continued into the Common Era (e.g., the Shekinah, the Logos), but by then the model had gained enough familiarity to allow two innovations: (1) identification of the Angel of Yahweh, the most prominent hypostasis of Yahweh, with a known, named angel; and (2) *angelification* (in the stead of the Angel of Yahweh) of humans to the second throne in heaven.

The subject of a divine hypostasis and the controversy over hypostasis nomenclature has been dealt with at length by several scholars. Resistance to the term by scholars has resulted in preference for terminology like "personified divine attributes," but this language is inadequate to describe the *independent identity* of divine attributes in many texts and also in later exegesis of those texts, not to mention that the discussion cannot be limited to attributes. The understanding of hypostasis as independent person has become prominent vocabulary in the scholarly discussion of mediator figures in Israelite religion, Samaritanism, early Christianity, and Rabbinism.

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[10] In the ancient Near East, *pan* ("face," "presence") is used in the sense of a representative of deity. The goddess Tannit is frequently known as *pn bʿl* ("face of Baal"; *KAI* 78:2; 79:1, 10-11; 85:1; 86:1; 87:2; 88:1; 137:1). Scholars at one time thought this phrase meant "pearl of Baal," but the alternate spelling *pʿn bʿl* (*KAI* 94:1; 97:1; 102:1; 105:1) and Greek transcriptions of the name as *phanē bal* (*KAI* 15:2) and *phenē bal* (*KAI* 176:2-3) proves otherwise. Attempts to identify the phrases as place names (like פנואל) have also been abandoned, especially in light of numismatic evidence.
[11] *KTU* 1.16.vi:56 [cf. 1.2.iv:28] and *KAI* 14:18.