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The Prophet's treatment of the Hebrew has been the subject of much discussion and is a matter of considerable interest, especially among those interested in Hebrew. I have examined elsewhere the linguistic details of the Prophet's commentary, as far as it can be reconstructed from the reports and minutes of that discourse. Beyond Joseph's specific linguistic understanding of the Hebrew text, however, are certain key ideas he derived from his encounter with that text. Revelation often results after wrestling with ideas, and Joseph's struggle with the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 seems to have yielded six concepts, which he expressed either in the King Follett Discourse or in a parallel discourse he gave on June 16, 1844.



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Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1

Kevin L. Barney

Joseph Smith spent Sunday afternoon, April 7, 1844, in a grove behind the Nauvoo Temple. There he gave a funeral sermon, which lasted for over two hours, dedicated to a loyal friend named King Follett, who had been crushed by a bucket of rocks while repairing a well.¹ Known today as the King Follett Discourse and widely believed to be the Prophet's greatest sermon,² this address was Joseph's most cogent and forceful presentation of his Nauvoo doctrine on the nature of God, including the ideas of a plurality of Gods and the potential of man to become as God.³ Several times in the first part of the discourse, Joseph expressed his intention to "go back to the beginning" in searching out the nature of God, and a little before midway through the sermon, he undertook a commentary on the first few words of the Hebrew Bible in support of the speech's doctrinal positions.

The Prophet's treatment of the Hebrew has been the subject of much discussion and is a matter of considerable interest, especially among those interested in Hebrew. I have examined elsewhere the linguistic details of the Prophet's commentary, as far as it can be reconstructed from the reports and minutes of that discourse.⁴ Beyond Joseph's specific linguistic understanding of the Hebrew text, however, are certain key ideas he derived from his encounter with that text. Revelation often results after wrestling with ideas, and Joseph's struggle with the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 seems to have yielded six concepts, which he expressed either in the King Follett Discourse or in a parallel discourse he gave on June 16, 1844.⁵ These six concepts may be summarized as follows:

1. The creation was effected, not "out of nothing," but from preexisting matter.
2. In the very beginning, there was a plurality of Gods.
3. Among this plurality, there was a head God (or there were head Gods).
4. These Gods met in a grand council.
5. These Gods in council appointed one God over us.
6. The idea of a plurality of Gods, which is most easily seen "at the beginning," is found throughout the Bible.

When propounded in 1844, each of these six ideas was no doubt considered unusual or unorthodox by those of other religious traditions (as well as by certain Latter-day Saints and former Latter-day Saints),⁶ and some people would certainly consider these doctrines no less theologically heterodox today. Yet the first five concepts are widely acknowledged by current biblical scholars to be accurate expressions of religious belief among the Hebrews during the time of the patriarchs. The sixth concept, while still representing a minority view, has also received strong scholarly support in recent decades. This article reviews the writings of a wide array of Old Testament commentators with reference to each of these six points.

Creation as Organization

Now, I ask all the learned men who hear me, why the learned doctors who are preaching salvation say that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. They account it blasphemy to contradict the idea. If you tell them that God made the world out of something, they will call you a fool. The reason is that they are unlearned but I am learned and know more than all the world put together—the Holy Ghost does, anyhow. If the Holy Ghost in me comprehends more than all the world, I will associate myself with it.

You ask them why, and they say, “Doesn’t the Bible say He created the world?” And they infer that it must be out of nothing. The word create came from the word BARA, but it doesn’t mean so. What does BARA mean? It means to organize; the same as a man would organize and use things to build a ship. Hence, we infer that God Himself had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter—which is element and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had. The pure principles of element are principles that never can be destroyed. They may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. Nothing can be destroyed. They never can have a beginning or an ending; they exist eternally.⁷

On lexical grounds, Joseph Smith understood *bārāʾ*, the second word of Hebrew Genesis 1:1 (translated “created” in the King James Version), as meaning “to organize,” and a good argument can be made that this interpretation is correct. This Hebrew word, which in the Bible is used only in the context of describing divine activity, occurs forty-nine times in the Old Testament (thirty-eight as an active verb, ten as a passive verb, and once as a nominal form). The verb seems to be used in the sense of shaping or fashioning (as by cutting)⁸ and is often paired synonymously with the verbs *yāsar*, “to form,” and *ʿāsāh*, “to do, make,”⁹ verbs that are indicative of an anthropomorphic conception of creative activity comparable to the craftsmanship of artisans. The Hebrew root *brʾ* seems to have had the original meaning “to separate, divide,”¹⁰ which is a fitting description of the creative activity of Genesis 1, where God separates the light from the

darkness, the day from the night, the heaven from the earth, the waters above the firmament from the waters beneath the firmament, and so on. That is, God *organizes* preexisting chaos by a process of separating, dividing, and thereby providing differentiation, perceptibility, and order.

Because of later theological dogmas and imperatives concerning the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation from nothing,” some will always reject this lexical argument; indeed, there is no way on strictly lexical grounds to prove, at least in the context of the creation of the cosmic powers, that *bārāʾ* cannot mean “to create from nothing.” Recent scholarship has shown, however, that such an interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is unsuitable, if not untenable, for both grammatical and historical reasons.

The grammatical structure of the Hebrew in Genesis 1:1 forecloses the possibility that *bārāʾ* could refer to creation from nothing in that passage. The KJV renders *bərēʾšīt* (the first word of Hebrew Genesis 1:1) as “in the beginning,” but the word *rēʾšīt* is actually a construct (or genitival) form and means “beginning of,” as in Genesis 49:3: *wərēʾšīt ʾōnī*, “and the beginning of my strength.” Indeed, in the early middle ages, Rashi (*Rabbi Shlomo* son of *Yitzhaq*) had given the correct interpretation:

But if you are going to interpret this passage in its plain sense, interpret it thus: At the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was (or the earth being) unformed and void . . . God said, “Let there be light.” For the passage does not intend to teach the order of creation, to say that these [namely, the heaven and the earth] came first; because if it had intended to teach this, it would have been necessary to use the form *bərīʾšōnā* “(In the beginning or At first) He created the heaven,” etc., since there is no instance of the form *rēʾšīt* in Scripture which is not in construct with the word following it.¹¹

Modern grammarians have labeled a construct noun followed by a verb an “asyndetic relative clause.”¹² In contrast with the KJV rendering, the word *bərēʾšīt* introduces not an absolute prepositional phrase but a temporal clause.¹³ The sense of Genesis 1:1–3 is as follows:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Verse 1 (protasis): | By way of beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, |
| Verse 2 (circumstantial clause): | the world at that time being a formless waste [description of primordial chaos], |
| Verse 3 (apodosis): | God said, “Let there be light.” ¹⁴ |

Thus, the *first* creative act was not the creation of heaven and earth but the creation of light. Nothing is said of the creation of primordial chaos, which already existed.

This interpretation of the structure of Genesis 1:1–3 has become the predominant scholarly understanding.¹⁵ Even a source as theologically conservative as J. R. Dummelow’s *Commentary on the Holy Bible* agrees with this analysis in rendering Genesis 1:1–3 into English:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—now the earth was waste and void, and darkness was over the deep, and the spirit of God was brooding over the waters—then God said: Let there be light.

Dummelow explains that “on this rendering ‘Creation’ is not ‘out of nothing,’ but out of pre-existing chaos.”¹⁶ This interpretation is supported not only by internal considerations of syntax but also by the fact that both the parallel creation account in Genesis 2:4b–7 and *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic, exhibit the same trifold structure: (i) dependent temporal clause + (ii) circumstantial clause + (iii) main clause.¹⁷ Thus, Hebrew grammar strongly supports Joseph Smith’s view in a way that lexical considerations alone could not.

As a historical matter, nearly all recent studies have concluded that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not native to Judaism, is nowhere attested in the Hebrew Bible, and probably arose in Christianity in the second century A.D. in the course of that religion’s fierce battle with Gnosticism. Many of these studies contend that the doctrine came into Judaism at the beginning of the Middle Ages (and even then never really succeeding in establishing itself as the accepted Jewish doctrine of creation).¹⁸ The historian’s perspective on this issue may perhaps be seen best in a scholarly debate on this subject between Professors David Winston and Jonathan Goldstein.¹⁹

In the past, some scholars had understood passages such as Wisdom of Solomon 11:17, where the author speaks of God’s “all-powerful hand which created the world out of formless matter,” as having been influenced by Greek philosophy, since the Jews of that time were assumed to have believed in creation from nothing.²⁰ Winston carefully reviews the evidence and establishes that passages such as the one from Wisdom of Solomon quoted above are in fact consistent with Jewish thought at the time regarding primordial formless matter. In fact, the first explicit formulations of *creatio ex nihilo* do not appear until the end of the second century, in the works of the Christian writers Tatian and Theophilus.²¹

In rabbinic literature, what seems to be the first explicit reference to *creatio ex nihilo* appears in a dialogue attributed to Rabban Gamaliel II and a philosopher in the late first century after Christ. Winston demonstrates, however, that this reference is really nothing more than a rejection of the Gnostic view that insisted on multiple creative powers. The argument was not that God created the world out of nothing but that the primordial elements (such as wind, water, and the primeval deep) were not themselves powers that assisted God in the process.²² Like similar ideas in some of the

later Christian literature, this position was nothing more than a response to Gnostic polemics about the creation. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* was missing not only from the Hebrew Bible and from Jewish-Hellenistic literature but also from rabbinic literature, where the more common view of creation was organization out of primordial matter. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* eventually appeared in Jewish philosophical and religious literature at a late date, having been influenced by Christian-Muslim thought.²³

Goldstein disagrees with Winston's reading of the statement by Rabban Gamaliel II, seeing it rather as an explicit expression of *creatio ex nihilo*. In Goldstein's view, that doctrine arose, not in the context of anti-Gnostic polemics, but rather in the context of polemics concerning what Goldstein refers to as the "extreme" view of bodily resurrection (meaning that humans will be resurrected, not just with a physical body, but with the same physical body they possess in this life). Goldstein suggests that the development of *creatio ex nihilo* was a response to what he calls the "two-body paradox."²⁴ Elements from a deceased body could be ingested by another person (as by being absorbed through the soil in a plant and turned into food, or as by "matter [being] vaporized by fire from a martyr's body . . . [and then] inhaled . . . by other human bodies"). Objections to the idea of extreme bodily resurrection could have been answered with the claim that an omnipotent God could create the resurrected body *ex nihilo*, if necessary, just as he originally created all matter.²⁵

Winston's reply to Goldstein, however, argues that there is no evidence that the supposed two-body paradox was known in the early centuries of Christianity or had any influence on the development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Although Tatian had spoken of the body being resurrected from nothingness, Tatian meant *relative* nothingness, not complete absence of existence. Tatian had argued that, just as a complete human body may spring from but a small drop of semen, so a resurrected body may come forth from the elemental "seeds" of that body buried in the earth. God was seen as having power to resurrect the body without reference to *ex nihilo* creation.²⁶

In his response, Goldstein "recanted" much of his earlier argument, acknowledging that he had misread some of the patristic and rabbinic literature. He continued, however, to affirm (*contra* Winston) that Rabban Gamaliel II had indeed unambiguously expressed that the world was created *ex nihilo*.²⁷

For present purposes, it does not make much difference whether Rabban Gamaliel II expressed a view favoring *creatio ex nihilo* at the end of the first century after Christ (Goldstein) or whether the first unambiguous Jewish expressions of that doctrine date back only to the ninth and tenth centuries (Winston), or whether *creatio ex nihilo* first arose in polemical arguments involving the Gnostic view of creation (Winston) or the

extreme view of bodily resurrection (Goldstein). What is significant for our purposes are the contours of this debate; there is no serious argument that *creatio ex nihilo* was a biblical doctrine. In fact, the more conservative Goldstein expressly acknowledges that, rather than expressing *creatio ex nihilo*, “Jewish exegetes and philosophers knew that the words of Genesis 1:1–2 could as easily (and even more easily) be interpreted to mean that God created the world from pre-existent matter.”²⁸ From this debate, we can see that the historical evidence strongly favors Joseph Smith’s rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* in his reading of Genesis 1:1.

A Plurality of Divine Beings

*In the very beginning there is a plurality of Gods—beyond the power of refutation.*²⁹

It can scarcely be doubted today that the earliest Hebrew conception of God was pluralistic. The evidence for this position is extensive,³⁰ and it is a position widely,³¹ if not universally, held by contemporary scholars. This does not mean that scholars fully understand or agree on important issues concerning the nature of this early pluralism; questions abound regarding its meaning for the Hebrews, its source (that is, Mesopotamian versus Canaanite influences), and the manner in which it evolved toward universal monotheism and the era when this monotheism superseded it (and whether it was ever fully superseded). These are “hot” topics in the world of biblical scholarship, and they still await a fully convincing analysis and synthesis.³² Nevertheless, the basic concept that the ancient Hebrews of the patriarchal age believed in a plurality of Gods has become an essentially accepted idea in scholarship today.

The King Follet Discourse supports the idea of a plurality of Gods. As indicated by the Prophet’s June 16, 1844, discourse, the two principal rational evidences from which Joseph derived this view were the plural form of the word *ʾēlohîm* and the plural syntax of Genesis 1:26.³³ There is now scholarly support for both positions, although these positions remain controversial.

Linguists have been unable to agree on the origins or significance of the plural form *ʾēlohîm*. Etymologically, *ʾēlohîm* is often assumed to be a plural of *ʾēl* as expanded by an intermediate *hēʾ* (perhaps reflecting Aramaic influence); the Hebrew form *ʾēlōah* (attested mainly in poetry) would then be a late singular derived backwards from the plural *ʾēlohîm*.³⁴ Even if correct, however, this etymology offers little insight into how or why the plural form came to be used with a singular meaning when referring to the God of Israel. One possibility is that the singular use of *ʾēlohîm* evolved as Hebrew theology moved from pluralism to monotheism, an argument that is resisted by more conservative scholars.³⁵ A close examination of the textual evidence suggests a somewhat more complicated

picture. Although the predominant use of *ʾēlōhîm* in the Hebrew canon today treats this word as a singular referring to the God of Israel, its use as a plural referring to the gods of other nations is also widely attested. Intriguingly, the use of *ʾēlōhîm* as a singular referring to a foreign god has also been preserved in the Hebrew Bible, and parallel usage involving the Akkadian word *ilanu* has been documented.³⁶ It appears that, from the very beginning, the word *ʾēlōhîm* had the capacity to be used as a plural *or* as a singular, as required by the context of the passage, irrespective of the identity of the God or Gods in question. Once one acknowledges the existence of an ancient Hebrew pantheon, it becomes likely that *ʾēlōhîm* was used at times in the plural to refer to the Gods of that pantheon. In fact, in a number of Old Testament passages, the word *ʾēlōhîm* originally appears to have had a plural force (even if the tradition that preserved that plural understood the word in a singular sense).

The ambiguity inherent in the possible singular or plural uses of the word *ʾēlōhîm* is captured by Gerald Cooke's use of parentheses in the title of his article "The Sons of (the) God(s)."³⁷ Cooke begins his study by stating that "any serious investigation of conceptions of God in the Old Testament must deal with recurrent references which suggest a pluralistic conception of deity."³⁸ After a careful review of many such passages, he asks whether they reflect "a purely literary form which was taken over by Israel, or [whether they are] an element of the living pattern of Israelite faith?"³⁹ and concludes that the latter is the more likely alternative. Perhaps the most succinct statement of the ambiguity inherent in the word *ʾēlōhîm* was offered by the German theologian Ludwig Köhler, who wrote that "God is called in Hebrew [*ʾēlōhîm*] but [*ʾēlōhîm*] means not only God, it means also a God, the God, Gods and the Gods."⁴⁰ These quotations illustrate that, although by no means universal, there is now scholarly support for relating the plural form *ʾēlōhîm* to ancient Hebrew pluralism, just as Joseph Smith did.

As for the plural syntax of Genesis 1:26, the possible explanations may be grouped into five categories, only two of which are taken seriously by most scholars today.⁴¹ The first of these two theories (and the one for which Joseph argued) is that a literal plural is involved:

It is natural to suspect, as some have, that the plural form in which God speaks is due to a reminiscence of an originally polytheistic source which the Priestly author [referred to by text critics as "P"] used or at least on which he modeled his story. In the creation myths with which both P and his readers were undoubtedly familiar counsel among the gods before their important undertakings was a fairly routine procedure.⁴²

The perceived problem with this approach is that the perspective of P was profoundly monotheistic and he would scarcely have allowed a literal plural to slip through his editing and become embedded in his text. The

principal alternative theory, therefore, is that the plural is a plural of deliberation, used rhetorically (such as the modern English examples of an individual deliberating with himself as in “Let’s do it!” or “What shall we do?”).

Arguments from an editorial perspective are always rather slippery; they assume that we fully understand the editorial stance of a redactor and that the redactor made no editorial mistakes (a proposition for which there are numerous counterexamples in the Old Testament text). Nevertheless, I am willing to assume for present purposes that P (who is presumed to have lived and worked around the time of the Exile) would have understood this verse in monotheistic terms. The commentators are concerned with what this verse meant to P; in contrast, Joseph’s treatment is concerned with what this verse meant originally (that is, in the earlier Israelite creation narrative from which P derived it). Westermann acknowledges that, although P could not have intended it so, “the idea of a heavenly court may well be in the background.”⁴³ The parallel expression in Genesis 3:22 suggests that in their original setting these words probably had a plural meaning: “man has become like one of us [*kəʾaḥad mīmennû*].” In this passage the use of the word “one” is inconsistent with a merely rhetorical plural.⁴⁴ Therefore, Joseph’s interpretation matches one of the two principal explanations of the plural forms in Genesis 1:26. Further, going behind P to the earlier sources, most scholars would agree that the plural is to be taken literally.

A Supreme God at the Head

*The [head one][heads] of the Gods brought forth the Gods.*⁴⁵

One can argue that the existence of a pantheon implies the presence of a supreme God who rules the pantheon. Joseph described this deity as the “head one [*rōš*] of the Gods.” In the case of the early Hebrew pantheon, that God was referred to variously as El, Elohim, or El Elyon (or El combined with other epithets).⁴⁶ El Elyon was the name of the God worshiped by Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18–20. This name can be interpreted in various ways: “God Most High,” “El the Highest One,” “El who is Elyon,” or “the God Elyon.” Ugaritic parallels suggest that the most likely interpretation is the second one, that of a proper name followed by a description. The association of the epithet Elyon with El, the Father of the Gods, is intriguing because the basic meaning of Elyon is “most high” or “highest” (Greek *hypsistos*), which is also a meaning of the word *rōš* (derived symbolically from the head being the highest part of the body). The Hebrew expression *rōš haʾēlōhîm* could be rendered “the head one of the Gods,” but it could just as easily be translated “the highest one of the Gods” or “God Most High.” Thus, not only did the Hebrew pantheon have a head

or supreme God, but one of his principal epithets is essentially a synonym of the word Joseph chose to represent that God.

Joseph's discourses are somewhat ambiguous as to whether there was one head God or multiple heads of the Gods. Theologically, Joseph seems to have preferred the idea of a single head God (this being the idea he expressed in the King Follett Discourse), but his reading of the Hebrew may have raised the possibility of multiple heads of the Gods, which he expressed almost as an aside in his June 16, 1844, discourse. The idea of multiple heads of the Gods does have a parallel with scholarly reconstruction of the ancient Hebrew pantheon. That pantheon appears to have consisted of an extensive body of unnamed, generic Gods, and a small number of named, major Gods (including El and Yahweh). Thus, reference to "the heads of the Gods" could be understood as referring in a similar sense to the major Gods of the pantheon.⁴⁷

The Premortal Council in Heaven

*Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council.*⁴⁸

That Joseph should have described the Gods as meeting in a "grand council" seems unusually prescient. The idea of the divine council or council of the Gods is widely acknowledged by scholars today, but the seminal study of this concept did not appear until one hundred years after the King Follett Discourse.⁴⁹

The character of the divine council as it was understood among the Israelites evolved over the course of time in two important respects. First, with the ascendancy of Yahwism, the nature of the council moved from being a council of the Gods to being merely an assembly of Yahweh surrounded by his attendant angels. These angels became increasingly generic until they eventually lost their one-time function of counseling God, serving only the ornamental function of worshiping Yahweh.

Second was the unique role the council would come to play in the ministry of the prophets of Israel. The prophets would be brought by vision into the presence of the divine council, where they would see the Lord seated upon his throne in the heavenly temple, surrounded by his divine counselors. The prophets would be allowed to witness and participate in the deliberations of the council. When a decision had been reached, the prophets would return from this vision and report the decree of the council to the people, usually in the very words they had heard in vision. This pattern is particularly evident when a prophet received his prophetic calling, and LDS scholars have identified a similar pattern in the prophetic commissions of Lehi in the Book of Mormon⁵⁰ and Enoch in the Book of Moses.⁵¹

Older Hebrew literature, however, retains the original conception of a council of the Gods. This can best be illustrated by certain passages from the Psalms (pertinent references to the council and its members are identified in Hebrew):

Ascribe to the LORD [YHWH], O heavenly beings [*bənê ʾēlīm*; lit. “sons of Gods”], ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (RSV Psalm 29:1)

God [*ʾēlōhīm*] has taken his place in the divine council [*baʿādat-ʾēl*]; in the midst of the gods [*ʾēlōhīm*] he holds judgment. . . . I say, “You are gods [*ʾēl-ohīm*], sons of the Most High [*bənê ʿelyōn*], all of you.” (RSV Psalm 82:1, 6)

Let the heavens praise thy wonders, O LORD [YHWH], thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones [*biqḥāl qəḏōšīm*]! For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD [YHWH]? Who among the heavenly beings [*bənê ʾēlīm*] is like the LORD [YHWH], a God [*ʾēl*] feared in the council of the holy ones [*sōd qəḏōšīm*], great and terrible above all that are round about him? O LORD God of hosts [YHWH *ʾēlōhē ṣəbāʾôt*], who is mighty as thou art, O LORD [YHWH], with thy faithfulness round about thee? (RSV Psalm 89:5–8)

The concept of the divine council is certainly present in the KJV Old Testament, but since the King James translators did not know of the concept, their translation largely obscures it. Compare, for instance, the clear RSV rendering of *baʿādat-ʾēl* in Psalm 82:1: “in the divine council,” with the obscure translation of the KJV: “in the congregation of the mighty.” In fact, the word “council” makes only one appearance in the KJV Old Testament, in Psalm 68:27, and in that verse, the word quite clearly does *not* refer to the divine council. That Joseph should have seen (a century before scholarly discussion began on the subject) that the Gods met in a “grand council” demonstrates, at the very least, an unusual perceptiveness.

A God Appointed over This World

*The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us.*⁵²

Joseph’s notion of the Gods appointing one God over us appears to be supported by an archaic, fossilized bit of scripture that has been preserved in Deuteronomy 32:8–9 (the following translation is from the Revised Standard Version):

When the Most High [*ʿelyōn*] gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God [*bənê ʾēlōhīm*]. For the LORD’S [YHWH] portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

The KJV at the end of verse 8 reads “sons of Israel,” following the Masoretic Text, but current scholars uniformly accept the reading reflected in the RSV, “sons of God,” which is supported both by the Septuagint and by the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵³

Scholars are divided into two camps concerning the interpretation of these verses. One position interprets this passage as predating the conflation (or attempted conflation) of El and Yahweh into a single deity. In this view, El assigns one of his sons to each of the nations, assigning his son Yahweh to Israel.⁵⁴ The other position interprets this passage as it would have been understood following the convergence, with Yahweh (=Elyon) assigning other Gods to other nations but retaining Israel for himself.⁵⁵ This second position is, once again, essentially an argument from editorial perspective. Although the Deuteronomist may have understood and preserved the passage in the latter sense, in its earlier setting it seems more likely to have been understood in the preconvergence sense. Although the former interpretation more closely parallels Joseph's view, both interpretations involve the divine council assigning individual Gods to different peoples.

A Continuous Conception of God

*It is a great subject I am dwelling on—the word Eloheam ought to be in the plural all the way thro.*⁵⁶

As we have seen, contemporary scholars acknowledge that the earliest Hebrew conception of God was pluralistic. The scholarly orthodoxy, however, has been that at some point in time (scholars differ concerning when) El and Yahweh were merged into a single God (often referred to as Yahweh Elohim, “the LORD God”) and that this merger was profoundly and completely effected. Joseph's assertion that early Hebrew pluralism had a continuity throughout the Bible is inconsistent with this view.

Over the past twenty years, however, a different scholarly perspective has begun to emerge, culminating in the publication of an important study by Margaret Barker entitled *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*.⁵⁷ This perspective has been heavily influenced by several book-length studies preceding Barker's, such as Alan F. Segal's *Two Powers in Heaven*, Jarl Fossum's *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*, and Larry W. Hurtado's *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*,⁵⁸ and numerous articles, including Peter Hayman's “Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?”⁵⁹ In fact, this new approach has garnered sufficient adherents to have been given a name: the new “religionsgeschichtliche Schule.”⁶⁰

The basic idea behind this new approach is that the attempted fusion of El and Yahweh was undertaken by a small coterie of priests and scribes representing a minority viewpoint, a group that has been called “the Yahweh Alone Party.”⁶¹ Much of today's Old Testament either assumes this identification as accomplished fact or is consciously devoted to the effort to sustain this identification, as in the formula *YHWH hū ha'elōhîm*

(“Yahweh, he is God” or, more pointedly, “Yahweh, he is Elohim”), which appears several times in the Old Testament. The new approach, however, argues that the effort to equate El and Yahweh did not fully take; that in much of popular religion these two Gods (or other divine entities derived from their memory) retained their separate identities. This view draws considerable support from the longstanding Hebrew notion of God in concert with an extensive underlying pluralism (as reflected, for instance, in the Hosts of Heaven, the Holy Ones, the Angels, or the Watchers) combined with a persistent overarching dualism “in which two divine entities are presupposed: one the supreme creator God, the other his vizier or prime minister, or some other spiritual agency, who really ‘runs the show,’ or at least provides the point of contact between God and humanity.”⁶²

The evidence supporting this newly emerging picture of the nature of God derives from many different sources that span the centuries. In fact, one of the reasons that this picture of early Israelite theology is only now emerging is that the evidence comes from so many disparate sources, with which no one scholar is completely conversant. For instance, Barker begins her study by going back to the beginning and working forward in time through the sources,⁶³ while Hayman reaches remarkably similar conclusions based in the first instance on his study of *Sefer Yeşira*,⁶⁴ which dates between A.D. 200 and 800. Most interestingly, this scholarship appears to have answered a longstanding problem of New Testament studies: How was it possible that the Jewish-Christians in the early church were able to acknowledge Jesus as divine? If, as many believe, the Jews of that era held to an iron-clad monotheism, such a result would have been very problematic. If, however, the pluralistic/dualistic elements of historic Hebrew theology had a continued vitality until and beyond the Christian era, then it becomes more understandable how the earliest Jewish-Christians were able to worship both the Father and the Son as readily as they did.

It is one thing for scholars today to identify the persistence of ancient Hebrew pluralism and to write papers and books on the subject (each building on the work of earlier scholars). It is quite another thing for Joseph Smith to have made these claims, against his own earlier pietistic preconceptions of monotheism and without any discernible support from the learned of the day, and to have committed the Church to this position as a principle of doctrine. *That* no scholar ever did. It was a course bespeaking a profound, serene, authoritative confidence that the position he outlined in the King Follett Discourse was true. Although he had discerned certain rational indications in the KJV text supporting this position, his confidence in that position could have derived only from his sense that it had been revealed to him spiritually.

In conclusion, we have seen that there is now scholarly support for the concepts Joseph derived from his reconstruction of Hebrew Genesis 1:1, namely, his rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*, the ancient conception of a plurality of Gods, the idea of a head God among that plurality, the council of the Gods, the appointment by the Gods of a single God over us, and the continuity of ancient Hebrew pluralism across biblical eras. That Joseph should have articulated these ideas so well and so forcefully in the middle of the nineteenth century is, in my view, nothing short of remarkable.

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1. For the sermon's historical background, see Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 179–92.

2. See the assessments cited in Cannon, "Historical Perspective," 179 n. 1. More recently, Harold Bloom has called the discourse "one of the truly remarkable sermons ever preached in America" and "the furthest frontier of Smith's prophecy before his martyrdom." Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 95, 124. See also the respectful contemplation of the sermon in Jacob Neusner, "Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 7–30.

3. My emphasis in this article is on certain concepts the Prophet Joseph Smith derived from his interpretation of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1. For a fuller consideration of the doctrinal content of the sermon, see Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 209–25.

4. Kevin L. Barney, "Joseph Smith's Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (winter 1997): 103–35.

5. For the original manuscript reports of these discourses, see Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: BYU Religious Studies Center and Bookcraft, 1980), 340–62 and 378–83. See also Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse: A Six Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamations* (n.p., 1983).

6. The second of these concepts contributed to the circumstances leading up to the Prophet's martyrdom; see "Preamble," *Nauvoo Expositor* 1 (June 7, 1844): 2, column 2.

7. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 203.

8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906; reprint, Boston, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 135.

9. For citations, see Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974–98), 2:246.

10. Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 2:245.

11. As quoted in Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Plain Meaning of Genesis 1:1–3," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (December 1983): 208, brackets in original.

12. Gary Anderson, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the Targums," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (January 1990): 21.

13. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 912.

14. This translation generally follows E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible, Genesis*, vol. 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 3, except that in verse 1 I have replaced "when God set about" with the more literal rendering "by way of beginning," as is suggested by Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1970), 542 n. 3.

15. This view is briefly explained in Keith Norman, "Ex Nihilo: The Development of the Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (1977): 295–96, which is primarily concerned with relating the emerging doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation with the development of the understanding of God in philosophy. In addition to the works and translations cited by Norman, supporters of this approach include H. Ewald, E. Schrader, K. Budde, J. M. P. Smith, W. F. Albright, O. Eissfeldt, R. Dussaud, P. Humbert, S. Herrmann, H. M. Orlinsky, C. A. Simpson, E. A. Speiser, N. A. Sarna, W. R. Lane, and J. B. Bauer. For citations, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1—a Critical Look," *Bible Translator* 22 (October 1971): 157 n. 16.

Despite these writings, a vocal minority, including Hasel, G. von Rad, U. Cassuto, C. Westermann, D. Kidner, E. Maly, G. Henton Davies, and Edward J. Young continues to argue that Genesis 1:1 should be taken as a main clause. For the argument, see Hasel, "Recent Translations," 154–67; Edward J. Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," *Westminster Theological Journal* 21 (May 1959): 133–46; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 93–98. Although these arguments are made on rational grounds, a strong theological motivation (protection of the notion of absolute creation) underlies most of them, as expressed by von Rad: "We do not follow the old conjecture that v.1 is not to be understood as an independent sentence but as the introductory clause to v.2 or even to v.3. Syntactically perhaps both translations are possible, not theologically." Quoted in Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 96.

Even if the minority position were correct, however, it would not necessarily follow that Genesis 1:1 describes a creation from nothing. In fact, Westermann argues that Genesis 1:1 should be taken as a main clause, but he then denies that *bārā'* has reference to creation from nothing on lexical grounds (just as Joseph did in 1844). Further, even if it could successfully be demonstrated that Genesis 1:1 were not only a main clause but also a description of *creatio ex nihilo*, most scholars would have to acknowledge that this very probably would have been a theological innovation of P, the putative author of Genesis 1:1–2:4a under the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis (assuming, for the sake of argument, that hypothesis to have a basis in reality). Joseph Smith cares nothing for P's meaning; his intention is rather to go back to the *beginning*. It is widely believed that the parallel account of J, beginning in Genesis 2:4b, which contains no hint of *creatio ex nihilo*, was written several centuries earlier than the relatively late P account. Therefore, Joseph's position on this issue is sustained in either event.

16. J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1909; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1933), 3.

17. Speiser, *Genesis*, 12.

18. For instance, see Anderson, "Interpretation of Genesis 1:1," 22; and Peter Hayman, "Monotheism—a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 1 (1991): 1–15.

19. At the time of publication of these articles, David Winston was a professor of history at the University of Iowa, and Jonathan A. Goldstein was a professor of

Hellenistic and Judaic studies at the Graduate Theological Union. See David Winston, "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony," *History of Religions* 11, no. 2 (1971): 185–202; Jonathan A. Goldstein, "The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35, no. 2 (1984): 127–35; David Winston, "Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited: A Reply to J. Goldstein," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37, no. 1 (1986): 88–91; and Jonathan Goldstein, "Creation Ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 2 (1987): 187–94.

20. Winston, "Theory of Cosmogony," 185.

21. Winston, "Theory of Cosmogony," 191–92 n. 21.

22. Winston, "Theory of Cosmogony," 187–89, discussing *Genesis Rabbah*, 1:9.

23. Winston, "Theory of Cosmogony," 199.

24. Goldstein, "Recantations and Restatements," 190.

25. Goldstein, "Origin of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo," 129.

26. Winston, "Reply to J. Goldstein," 89.

27. Goldstein, "Recantations and Restatements," 188.

28. Goldstein, "Recantations and Restatements," 187.

29. From Thomas Bullock's manuscript report of Joseph's June 16, 1844, discourse, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.

30. See, in general, Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

31. Many scholars see an early pluralism evolving over time by the convergence of some Gods and the differentiation of others into monolatry, with monotheism itself arising only during the exile. Baruch Halpern, "'Brisker Pipes Than Poetry': The Development of Israelite Monotheism," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 77–115; Lowell K. Handy, "The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," in *The Triumph of Elohims: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana V. Edelman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 40; and for additional citations, see Smith, *Early History of God*, 159–60 nn. 35 and 37. The more conservative approach sees monotheism as being established much earlier, in the Mosaic age. Yet even this approach assumes a prior pluralism. For instance, William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (London: Athlone, 1968). Albright was an influential supporter of the conservative view and on page 134 casually refers to "the old Hebrew gods." Even the religiously conservative Roland Kenneth Harrison, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 396, acknowledges that patriarchal theology was pluralistic.

32. See David Noel Freedman's review of *The Early History of God* in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 4 (1991): 693–98.

33. In that discourse, Joseph is recorded as having said:

If we pursue the Heb further—it reads The Head one of Gods said let us make man in our image. I once asked a learned Jew once—if the Heb. language compels us to render all words ending in heam in the plural—why not render the first plural—he replied it would ruin the Bible—he acknowledged I was right. (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379)

34. Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:273.

35. So argues Harrison in *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 398: "Insofar as plural forms occurred in Hebrew names for God or in titles relating to the Godhead, they were not so much vestigial remains of an earlier stage of polytheism as grammatical structures designed to emphasize the majesty of the God who was being described."

36. See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 2:413. For *ʾēlōhîm* as a singular reference to a foreign god, see Judges 11:24 (Chemosh), 1 Kings 11:5 (Ashtoreth), and 2 Kings 1:2 (Baal-zebub of Ekron).

37. Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 22–47.

38. Cooke, "Sons of (the) God(s)," 22.

39. Cooke, "Sons of (the) God(s)," 45.

40. Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 36.

41. For general overviews of the explanations, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 144–45; and Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 53–54. The three widely discounted theories are (1) the dogmatic assertion that the plural is an expression of the Trinity, (2) the notion that the plural was used to avoid the idea of any immediate resemblance of humans to God (labelled by Westermann as "highly questionable theologically"), and (3) Speiser's argument that the plural forms are simply used in grammatical agreement with the plural *ʾēlōhîm* and should, like *ʾēlōhîm*, be given a singular meaning (an idea which ignores actual Hebrew usage elsewhere in the Old Testament and which Speiser's fellow Catholic Vawter rejects out of hand).

42. Vawter, *On Genesis*, 53–54.

43. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 145.

44. Cooke, "Sons of (the) God(s)," 23.

45. The singular is attested in each of the four manuscript reports (Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton) of the King Follett Discourse; see Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 341, 345, 351, and 358. For the plural, see Thomas Bullock's report of the Prophet's June 16, 1844, discourse, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.

46. See in general Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:242–61. Other El epithets include El Olam (Everlasting God) and El Shaddai (God Almighty).

47. Compare the Akkadian expression *ilāni elūti*, "the highest gods," as described in relation to the epithet Elyon in John Van Seters, "The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis," *Biblica* 61 (April 1980): 228.

48. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:307–8.

49. H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 45 (April 1944): 151–57. Further studies include Frank Moore Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (1953): 274–77; Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83, no. 2 (1964): 279–86; Patrick D. Miller Jr., "The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (January 1968): 100–107; N. L. A. Tidwell, "Wāʾōmar (Zech. 3:5) and the Genre of Zechariah's Fourth Vision," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (September 1975): 343–55; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980).

50. See Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26 no. 3 (1986): 67–95; and John W. Welch, "The Calling of a Prophet," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 35–54.

51. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Narrative Call Pattern in the Prophetic Commission of Enoch (Moses 6)," *BYU Studies* 26 (fall 1986): 97–105. On the relevance of the divine

council to the premortal existence, see Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations and Heavenly Councils," in C. Wilfred Griggs, ed., *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1986), 173–98.

52. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.

53. The reading "sons of God" is attested in two fragments from Qumran: 4QDeutⁱ and 4QDeut⁹. See Patrick W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut. 32) from Qumran," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 136 (December 1954): 12–15; Patrick W. Skehan, "Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 21; and Julie Duncan's definitive edition in *Qumran Cave 4–IX: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Discoveries in the Judean Desert 14*, ed. Eugene Ulrich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 90. Although many Septuagint manuscripts read "angels of God," which represents an alternate attempt to soften the original reading, the oldest Greek witness to Deuteronomy, P. Fuad 266 (Rahlfs 848), reads "sons" rather than "angels." John W. Wevers, the editor for the Deuteronomy volume of the Göttingen edition of the Septuagint, regards the reading "sons of God" as assured. See John W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 513. For additional evidence supporting this reading, see Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 157.

54. See, for example, Otto Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1956): 25–37. Note that in the Ras Shamra tablets El is said to have seventy sons, and in Hebrew tradition there were seventy nations (see Gen. 10). This explains the late scribal attempt to replace "sons of God" with "sons of Israel," because in Hebrew tradition the sons of Israel also numbered seventy (see Exod. 1:5).

55. This is the position of the Albright school; see Mullen, *Divine Council*, 204. As Mullen explains, Albright had argued that Elyon should be read as equivalent to Yahweh here on grounds of distant parallelism; for citations regarding the concept of distant parallelism, see Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4 (fall 1995): 32.

56. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.

57. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). Awareness by LDS scholars of the significance of Barker's study is reflected, for instance, in Daniel C. Peterson, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 2 (1995): 101; Martin S. Tanner, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 2 (1995): 34–36; and Bryan J. Thomas, in *FARMS Review of Books* 8, no. 1 (1996): 39.

58. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985); Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

59. This was Hayman's presidential address to the British Association for Jewish Studies, given at Edinburgh on August 21, 1990, and provides an excellent, concise overview of this new approach.

60. Or the new "History of Religions School." The name was coined by Martin Hengel; see Jarl Fossum, review of *Great Angel*, by Margaret Barker, *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (April 1994): 187.

61. Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 23.

62. Hayman, "Monotheism," 2.

63. *The Great Angel* is essentially a sequel to Barker's prior book *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), which first led her to the ideas articulated in *The Great Angel*. In the King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith explained that his procedure was (similarly) to go back to the beginning and then work his way forward:

In the first place I wish to go back to the beginning of creation. There is the starting point in order to know and be fully acquainted with the mind, purposes, decrees, and ordinations of the great Elohim that sits in the heavens. For us to take up beginning at the creation it is necessary *for us* to understand something of God Himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is very easy for us to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, *we may go wrong, and* it is a hard matter to get right. (Larson, "Newly Amalgamated Text," 199)

64. Hayman, "Monotheism," 2.