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Stephen O. Smoot

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# THE DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Stephen O. Smoot

*Abstract: The Book of Mormon purports to be a record that originates from the ancient Near East. The authors of the book claim an Israelite heritage, and throughout the pages of the text can be seen echoes of Israelite religious practice and ideology. An example of such can be seen in how the Book of Mormon depicts God's divine council, a concept unmistakably found in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). Recognizing the divine council in both the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon may help us appreciate a more nuanced understanding of such theological terms as "monotheism" as well as bolster confidence in the antiquity of the Nephite record.*

"I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him" (1 Kings 22:19 NRSV).

"He saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8).

Although most of its narrative takes place in ancient Mesoamerica, the Book of Mormon is yet in many regards a book rooted in the ancient Near East. The book opens during "the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah" (1 Nephi 1:4),<sup>1</sup> shortly before the Babylonian decimation of Judah at the beginning of the sixth

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1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in the Fall 2013 issue of the journal *Studia Antiqua: A Student Journal of the Ancient World*, published by the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University. This updated and expanded version is republished here with permission. All citations from the Book of Mormon come

century BC. Its primary authors were Israelites, and its later authors and eponymous editor, even as ancient Mesoamericans, were evidently familiar with Israelite literary conventions.<sup>2</sup> Even after centuries of integration and exchange with the cultures of ancient Mesoamerica,<sup>3</sup> Book of Mormon peoples retained at least some degree of cultural familiarity with the ancient Near East.

For instance, the Book of Mormon exhibits, in many respects, an intimate familiarity with ancient Israelite religious concepts. One such example is the Book of Mormon's portrayal of what is called the divine council. Following a lucid biblical pattern, the Book of Mormon provides a depiction of the divine council and narrates several instances where

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from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

2. See John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 77–91; "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Languages and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 2:195–196; David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage Press, 2003); Melvin Deloy Pack, "Hebraisms," in *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 321–25; Donald W. Parry, "Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 155–89.

3. On such, see generally John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985); "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34; *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998); *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013); Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, six volumes (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007); *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015); Mark Alan Wright, "'According to Their Language, Unto Their Understanding': The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65; "Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, Temple on Mount Zion, 1 ed., Matthew B. Brown et al. (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 243–257; "Axes Mundi: Ritual Complexes in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 79–96; Mark Alan Wright and Brant Gardner, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 25–55.

prophets were introduced into this assembly, made privy to heavenly secrets, and commissioned to preach their newfound knowledge to others. This paper explores how the Book of Mormon depicts this important aspect of ancient Israelite religion as well as how its depiction of the divine council fits strikingly well with the presentation of the same in the Hebrew Bible.

### **Israelite Monotheism, Polytheism, and Monolatry**

Before looking at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, however, we must first define the terms used in this paper as well as their significance from a biblical perspective. Biblical texts such as the first commandment of the Decalogue, “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3),<sup>4</sup> the Shema of Deuteronomy, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (KJV Deuteronomy 6:4), and the polemics of Isaiah (Isaiah 43:10–12; 44:6–8; 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–22) are typically marshaled to buttress the claim made in contemporary mainstream Judeo-Christianity that the Hebrew Bible is strictly monotheistic: it acknowledges only the existence of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

While it is commonplace to speak of the biblical depiction of God as monotheistic, there is in fact a much more complex phenomenon occurring in the pages of the text (to say nothing of what occurred in Israel’s history as manifest in recovered extra-biblical texts and artifacts).<sup>5</sup> This includes an acknowledgement of the existence of a plurality of divine beings. So clear are these “polytheistic” tendencies in the Bible that Gerald Cooke began his foundational 1964 study with the following admonition: “Any serious investigation of conceptions of God in the Old Testament must deal with the recurrent references which suggest a pluralistic conception of deity.”<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have taken Cooke’s charge very seriously in subsequent studies. Nearly three decades after the appearance of Cooke’s article, Peter Hayman questioned whether “monotheism,” as understood and used today, is a misused term by modern readers to describe Israelite religion. “The pattern of Jewish beliefs about God remains monarchistic

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4. Unless otherwise indicated, all English biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. All Hebrew citations are from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

5. See generally William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

6. Gerald Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35, no. 1 (1964): 22.

throughout,” writes Hayman. That is, the Hebrew Bible depicts God as “king of a heavenly court consisting of many other powerful beings, not always under his control,” and as “not the only divine being.”<sup>7</sup> Michael S. Heiser, an Evangelical scholar, has recently agreed that the nature of Israelite “monotheism” is not as straightforward as readers of the Bible might suspect and must be qualified. “‘Monotheism’ as it is currently understood means that no other gods exist. This term is inadequate for describing Israelite religion,” he observes.

“Henotheism” and “monolatry,” while perhaps better, are inadequate because they do not say enough about what the canonical writer believed. Israel was certainly “monolatrous,” but that term comments only on what Israel believed about the proper object of worship, not what it believed about Yahweh’s nature and attributes with respect to the other gods.<sup>8</sup>

Mark S. Smith further warns against cavalierly tossing out terms such as “monotheism” and “polytheism” to describe the theology of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> These terms, Smith reminds us, have nuanced meanings and have been understood differently by various religious groups over time.<sup>10</sup> The problem, according to Smith, lies in the fact that our modern terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” are just that — modern. Not just the words themselves but the very concepts underlying these modern constructs would probably have been incoherent to the ancient Israelites. “Monotheism and polytheism in themselves hold little meaning for the ancients apart from the identity of the deities whom they revered and served,” Smith writes.

No polytheist thought of his belief-system as polytheist per se. If you asked ancient Mesopotamians if they were polytheists, the question would make no sense. If you asked them if they or the other people they knew acknowledge a variety of deities, that’s a different question, because for them the deities in question mattered, not the theoretical position of polytheism.

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7. Peter Hayman, “Monotheism — A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 15.

8. Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 1 (2008): 28–29.

9. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10–14.

10. Modern Christians who may take for granted the idea that orthodox Trinitarianism is “monotheistic” should just ask their Jewish or Muslim acquaintances their thoughts on the matter.

The point applies to monotheism as well. If you asked ancient Israelites ... if they were monotheists, they would not have understood the question. If you asked them if there is any deity apart from Yahweh, then that's also another question, because for them what mattered was the exclusive claim and relationship of the Israelite people and their deity.<sup>11</sup>

Matters are further complicated, according to the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, because ancient Israelite “monotheism” appears to have assumed a “polytheistic” worldview that acknowledged the reality of multiple deities. As Assmann explains,

This idea [of monotheism] presupposes the existence of other gods. Paradoxically, the implied existence of other gods is of fundamental importance to the basic idea of biblical monotheism. The opposition of “God” and “gods” reflects the opposition of Israel and the nations (*goyim*, or gentiles), and the difference of uniqueness that sets “God” apart from the “gods” reflects the difference of being among the chosen or chosenness and of belonging within the *b'rit* (“covenant”) that sets Israel apart from the nations. In the same sense that the idea of the chosen people presupposes the existence of other peoples, the idea of the “one God” (*YHWH echad*) presupposes the existence of other gods. Decisive is not the oneness of God, which is a philosophical idea, but the *difference* of God ... The biblical concept of God is not about absolute but about relational oneness.<sup>12</sup>

And so we are left wondering just how to describe the religious system of biblical Israel. Indeed, the recent treatment by Benjamin Sommer indicates that this debate is not likely to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction anytime soon.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to Hayman, for instance, Sommer believes “monotheism” is in fact an appropriate term to define the biblical conception of deity—especially with regards to describing “how Israelite religion differs crucially from its environment”—but nevertheless acknowledges that any definition of “monotheism” used to describe ancient Israelite religion must nevertheless account for the clear evidence of polytheism in the Hebrew Bible. “Studying the Hebrew Bible

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11. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 11.

12. Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 3–4, emphasis in original.

13. Benjamin D. Sommer, “Monotheism,” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 239–270.



within its own cultural context ... suggests that the polarity between monotheism and polytheism is of less explanatory value than many students of religion suppose,” he remarks.<sup>14</sup> However one interprets the relevant biblical passages, it must be admitted that “the possibility that biblical texts describing a divine council are polytheistic must be taken seriously.”<sup>15</sup>

Since our modern term “monotheism” may or may not do justice in describing the Israelite conception of God, we are put in an awkward position: how to translate biblical concepts into a modern vocabulary. Perhaps the closest modern word to describe Israelite religion is one mentioned above, namely, *monolatry*: “The worship of one god, especially where other gods may be supposed to exist.”<sup>16</sup> In a monolatrous religious system, one deity is reserved for worship without explicitly denying the existence of other gods. This may be the most appropriate modern term to describe early Israelite religion, inasmuch as “monotheism” appears to be inadequate, “polytheism” too far-reaching, and “henotheism,” which posits that other familial, tribal or national gods may not only exist but may also be the object of syncretic worship, does violence to the biblical injunction for Israel to reserve worship for Yahweh alone.

This should not be too difficult for Latter-day Saints to grasp, inasmuch as our own modern conception of God is arguably monolatrous. The Prophet Joseph Smith articulated what is apparently a monolatrous theology in a discourse given on June 16, 1844. “Paul says there are Gods many and Lords many,” the Prophet preached on that occasion, appealing to 1 Corinthians 8:5–6. “I want to set it forth in a plain and simple manner ... to us there is but one God — that is, pertaining to us — and He is in all and through all.” Joseph insisted, “I say there are Gods many and Lords many, but to us only one; and we are to be in subjection to that one.”<sup>17</sup>

This very brief survey, I freely admit, cannot do full justice to this very complicated matter. It should, hopefully, keep us alert and attentive to these complications as we fashion an understanding of the biblical conception of God. Acknowledging that we cannot capture the religion of ancient Israel with only one descriptor but cautiously using *monolatry*

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14. Sommer, “Monotheism,” 264.

15. *Ibid.*, 255.

16. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, s.v. “monolatry.”

17. History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 102, online at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/108>, spelling and punctuation standardized.

as a practical term for our present purposes, we proceed to look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

### The Council (and Counsel) of (the) God(s)

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of the divine council it frequently employs the noun  $\text{סֹד}$  (*sôd*), which carries both the sense of “council” as well as “counsel.” One standard Hebrew lexicon defines *sôd* as both a “council, in familiar conversation ... divan or circle of familiar friends ... assembly, company” as well as a “counsel, taken by those in familiar conversation ... secret counsel, which may be revealed.”<sup>18</sup> The latter sense of *sôd* is comparable to the Greek  $\mu\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$  (*mystērion*), which is used in later biblical writings to denote secret counsel (LXX Judith 2:2; Tobit 12:7, 11; 2 Maccabees 13:21) or otherwise unknowable answers to secrets that God reveals to his prophet (LXX Daniel 2:18–19, 27–30). But *mystērion* only goes so far in adequately conveying the sense of the Hebrew, which is much more complex than simply “mystery.”<sup>19</sup> In his discussion of *sôd* in the Hebrew Bible, S. B. Parker informs us that the word “may be applied to both the human and divine spheres” (compare Jeremiah 15:17 with 23:18).<sup>20</sup> Or, as Taylor Halverson explains it, “Just as a royal court consists of different members with different roles and purposes (e.g., counselor, messenger, jester, warrior, or bodyguard), so too God’s heavenly court was composed of a variety of heavenly beings.”<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew Bible itself offers varied terminology for this council, including:

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18. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1010), s.v. *sôd*.

19. For a discussion, see Heinz-Josef Fabry, “ $\text{סֹד}$ ,” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Riiinggren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986), 5:775–782.

20. S. B. Parker, “Council,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons of the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 391.

21. Taylor Halverson, “The Path of Angels: A Biblical Pattern for the Role of Angels in Physical Salvation,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 154.

- The Assembly of God (עדת-אל; *ădat ʿel*)<sup>22</sup>
- The Congregation of the Holy Ones (קהל קדשים; *qēhal qēdôshîm*)<sup>23</sup>
- The Council of the Holy Ones (סוד קדשים; *sôd qēdôshîm*)<sup>24</sup>
- The Council of Yahweh (סוד יהוה; *sôd yhw̄h*)<sup>25</sup>
- The Council of God (סוד אלוה; *sôd ʿlôh*)<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, just as the biblical authors use a number of different names to refer to the divine council itself, they also used a litany of names and titles for its members. Ronald Hendel, in his introductory remarks on Israelite religion, straightforwardly tells us that Yahweh was “not the only god in Israelite religion. Like a king in his court, Yahweh was served by lesser deities.”<sup>27</sup> Turning to the Hebrew Bible, we discover numerous designations for these deities—the members of Yahweh’s court—as including:

- The Host(s) of (the) Heaven(s) (צבא השמים / צבאות; *šēbāʿ ha-šāmaʾîm / šēbāʾôt*)<sup>28</sup>
- Gods (אלהים / אלים; *ʿêlîm / ʿlôhîm*)<sup>29</sup>
- Sons of the Most High (בני עליון; *bēnê ʿelyôn*)<sup>30</sup>
- Sons of God(s) (בני אלהים; *bēnê ʿlôhîm*)<sup>31</sup>
- (The) Heavens (שמים; *šāmaʾîm*)<sup>32</sup>
- Morning Stars (כוכבי בקר; *kôkbê bôqer*)<sup>33</sup>
- Angels (מלאכים; *malākîm*)<sup>34</sup>

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22. Psalm 82:1.

23. Psalm 89:5.

24. Psalm 89:7.

25. Jeremiah 23:18.

26. Job 15:8.

27. Ronald Hendel, “Israelite Religion,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (New York: HarperOne, 2006), xlv.

28. 1 Kings 22:19; Nehemiah 9:6; Isaiah 37:16; Psalm 89:8; 148:2; Jeremiah 33:22; 44:25; Daniel 8:10; Haggai 2:6; Malachi 3:10.

29. Exodus 15:11; Deuteronomy 10:17; 32:8, 43; Joshua 22:22; Psalm 8:5; 82:1, 6; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:9; 135:5; 138:1.

30. Psalm 82:6–7.

31. Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 2:1; 38:7; Psalm 29:1; 89:6. For an excellent discussion, see S. B. Parker, “Sons of (The) God(s),” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons of the Bible*, 1499–1510.

32. Psalm 89:6.

33. Job 38:7.

34. Genesis 28:12; Psalm 78:49; 91:11; 103:20; 148:2.

As we see from this sampling of citations, the biblical authors were by no means reticent to describe Yahweh's *sôd* and its members. But besides merely naming these divinities, the Hebrew Bible contains several passages (both narrative and poetic) that depict how the divine council was functionally conceived in ancient Israel. By looking at just a few of these passages we can sketch the contours of the biblical conception of deity and compare such with the Book of Mormon (which we shall do below).

### The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible

The first place where we detect the divine council in the Bible is, fittingly, in the beginning: Genesis. According to the account of the Creation found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, the last creative command of God (אלהים; *‘ēlohîm*) was, “Let us [נעשה; *na‘āseh*] make humankind in our image [צלמנו; *šalēmēnû*], according to our likeness [דמותנו; *dēmûtēnû*]” (Genesis 1:26). The presence of the first person plural prefix on *‘āseh* and the first person common plural suffix on both *šalēm* and *dēmût* has long perplexed orthodox Christian and Jewish exegetes, whose strict monotheism did not allow them even to entertain the idea of a plurality of gods. Such interpreters have commonly offered the argument that Genesis 1:26–27 is an example of what is commonly called the *pluralis majestatis*. Briefly stated, the idea is that monarchs, when acting in a courtly scene, are known to address themselves in the plural, and so God, who is the ultimate monarch, can rightly address himself in the plural as well.<sup>35</sup> However, when the plurals here and elsewhere (e.g. Genesis 11:5–7) are read as reflecting the presence of the divine council, a plausible alternative exegesis immediately arises. “The plural *us*, *our* ... probably refers to the divine beings who compose God’s heavenly court,” writes David M. Carr in a succinct representation of the view of many modern biblical

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35. J. R. Dummelow offered just such an explanation in his popular, though now outdated, commentary. See *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, ed. J. R. Dummelow (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 5. Some Latter-day Saint writers have also been attracted to this explanation. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 38.

scholars,<sup>36</sup> which includes Hendel,<sup>37</sup> Levenson,<sup>38</sup> Cooke,<sup>39</sup> Brettler,<sup>40</sup> and others.

Another instance in the Hebrew Bible where we encounter a plurality in the text is the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: “Comfort [נַחֲמוּ; *naḥmû*], O comfort [נַחֲמוּ; *naḥmû*] my people, says your God [אֱלֹהֵיכֶם; *’ēlohēykem*]. Speak [דַּבְּרוּ; *dabērû*] tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry [קְרֹאוּ; *qîrē’û*] to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1–2). This passage employs the plural imperative suffix on the verbs throughout. Likewise, the subject *’ēlohîm* features the masculine plural possessive suffix. This, in conjunction with other evidence, has lead scholars to conclude the divine council is being addressed in this text.<sup>41</sup> As summarized by J. J. M. Roberts, in this passage “God commissions the divine council to issue a message of consolation to the people of Israel, and the prophet, who overhears the voices of the council, clarifies the message .... [The] imperatives are all plural, addressed to the angelic members of God’s royal council.”<sup>42</sup>

But besides hinting at the divine council in technical grammatical constructions, there are also fairly explicit narrative depictions of prophets enwrapped in heavenly visions and receiving the *sôd*. The

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36. David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

37. Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 6. “The plural seems to refer to the lesser deities of the divine assembly described in other biblical texts.”

38. Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12. “The plural construction (Let us ... ) most likely reflects a setting in the divine council ... God the King announces the proposed course of action to His cabinet of subordinate deities, though he alone retains the power of decision.”

39. Cooke, “The Sons of (The) God(s),” 22–23. “[I]t must be acknowledged as at least a strong possibility that [Genesis 1:26–27] represent[s] a conception of a plurality of divine beings.”

40. Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42–43. “[T]he text is implicitly portraying God in terms of a human king: God is talking to his royal counselors or cabinet ... The creation of people is so significant that this creative act alone demands God consult his cabinet, comprised of angels or other divine figures.”

41. Frank M. Cross Jr., “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 4 (Oct. 1953): 274–77; Christopher R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (1990): 229–47.

42. J. J. M. Roberts, “Isaiah,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 961.

biblical precedence for this phenomenon is readily discernable in a passage beloved by Latter-day Saints: “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [סוד; *sôd*] unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7 KJV). More than merely a “secret” as implied by the KJV’s rendering, the *sôd* in this passage is not just confidential instruction delivered by God but also the manifestation of God’s heavenly court.

That the *sôd* functions as both divine instruction as well as God’s council is seen clearly in passages such as 1 Kings 22. In this pericope, controversy arises over whether Judah and Israel are to recommence their warfare with Aram. While King Ahab of Israel declares his earnest desire to go to war, King Jehoshaphat of Judah remains reluctant until he can be assured victory by “the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 22:1–12). The prophet Micaiah is consulted, who prophesies defeat for Ahab and Jehoshaphat if they go to war (1 Kings 22:13–18). Skeptical of the veracity of this oracle, Ahab presses Micaiah to furnish his prophetic credentials, whereupon Micaiah proclaims:

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven [צבא השמים; *šēbā’ ha-šāmaim*] standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the Lord said, “Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit [רוח; *rûāh*] came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, “I will entice him.” “How?” the Lord asked him. He replied, “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Then the Lord said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.” So you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you. (1 Kings 22:19–23)

This text provides an excellent example of how a prophet received the *sôd*. It included both a theophany of Yahweh on his throne surrounded by his heavenly retinue and subsequently being made aware of confidential heavenly secrets. In so doing the prophet was legitimized; his message bore divine sanction. The receipt of the *sôd* being an essential component to a prophet’s legitimacy can be seen, for instance, in Jeremiah 23, where Jeremiah’s prophetic competitors assuring Judah’s safety in the face of the pending Babylonian conquest are dismissed as illegitimate precisely because they had *not* been introduced to Yahweh’s council (v. 18, 22). “Unlike these [false] prophets,” Brueggemann suggests, “who are so readily

dismissed, it is to be inferred that Jeremiah did indeed stand in the divine council, was sent by YHWH, and so speaks a true word (see 23:18).<sup>43</sup>

The book of Job further furnishes a description of the function of the divine council, albeit without any explicit prophetic commission. Beginning in Job 1 and continuing into Job 2, a company of the *bēnê 'ēlōhîm*, God's "celestial entourage,"<sup>44</sup> convenes before Yahweh in his court. Included among the *bēnê 'ēlōhîm* is השטן (*ha-sātān*), "the accuser" or "the adversary" (Job 1:6–7; 2:1). The council deliberates over Job's faithfulness, with the accuser insisting that Job only remains faithful because of his abundant blessings (Job 1:7–12; 2:2–8). To prove Job's faithfulness, Yahweh deigns to allow the accuser to test him.

We now turn to the Psalms for a glimpse at a series of poetic depictions of the divine council. Despite the protestations of some interpreters to the contrary, Psalm 82 is in fact "the textbook passage" to "demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible assumes and affirms the existence of other gods."<sup>45</sup> This psalm opens with a depiction of God taking "his place in the divine council [עדת-אל; *ădat 'ēl*]" and holding judgment "in the midst of the gods [אלהים; *'ēlōhîm*]" (Psalm 82:1). After reprimanding these gods for failing to uphold their divine mandates (Psalm 82:3–4), God then issues a warning: "I say, 'You are gods [אלהים; *'ēlōhîm*], children of the Most High [בני עליון; *bēnê 'elyôn*], all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince" (Psalm 82:6–7).

Some have gone to great lengths to argue that these "gods" in Psalm 82 are mortals,<sup>46</sup> perhaps judges or magistrates, but this argument fails for many reasons. Besides the insurmountable linguistic and exegetical absurdities in such a reading, when the imagery of Psalm 82 is compared with other Psalms, such as Psalm 29:1 ("Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings [בני אלים; *bēnê 'ēlîm*; literally "sons of gods"], ascribe to the Lord glory and

43. See the commentary by Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–60.

44. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 12.

45. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?" 2. Rebecca Lesses agrees, noting that "the divine council also appears in Psalm 82:1, where its members are called 'gods.'" See Rebecca Lesses, "Divine Beings," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 544.

46. I have collected and summarized these arguments in Stephen O. Smoot, "Psalm 82: A Latter-day Saint Reading," in *2014 BYU Religious Education Student Symposium* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2014), 156–158.

strength.”) and Psalm 89:5–8 (see below), it becomes clear these gods cannot be humans but must be divine beings.<sup>47</sup>

In turning to Psalm 89, we see a striking depiction of the divine assembly of Yahweh.

Let the heavens [שמ׳ים; *šāma’im*] praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones [קֹהֵל קֳדָשִׁים; *qēhal qēdōshîm*]. For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים; *bēnê ’ēlîm*] is like the Lord, a God feared in the council of the holy ones [סֹד קֳדָשִׁים; *sôd qēdōshîm*], great and awesome above all that are around him? (Psalm 89:5–7)

In typical imagery found in other biblical passages describing the divine council (that, as we shall see, is also present in the Book of Mormon), the heavenly assembly of the sons of the gods in this psalm is said to be surrounding [סָבַב; *sābab*] the incomparably awesome Yahweh. Thus, to insist that Psalm 82 is the exception to an explicit and consistent rule in the psalms is nothing more than special pleading.

One final example will suffice. This one should be of particular interest to Latter-day Saints since it not only serves as an example of the divine council but also an example of the corruption of the biblical text at the hands of ancient copyists. Deuteronomy 32, sometimes called the Song of Moses, contains a poem Moses is said to have recited to “the whole assembly of Israel” (Deuteronomy 31:30) just before his death. The KJV, following the Masoretic version of the text, renders one crucial part of the poem as follows:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations:  
ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee. When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people *according to the number of the children of Israel*. For the LORD’S portion *is* his people; Jacob *is* the lot of his inheritance.  
(vv. 7–9, emphasis added)

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47. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 18–20; Daniel C. Peterson, “‘Ye Are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witness to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), esp. 475–84; Daniel O. McClellan, “Psalm 82 in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Tradition,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 79–96.



As it reads in the KJV, Moses sings here that God established national boundaries based on the number of the children of Israel (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; *bēnê yiśrā'ēl*) and retained the Israelites (“Jacob”) for himself. More recent translations of this passage, however, contained a significant variant reading.

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. When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples *according to the number of the gods*; the LORD’S own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share. (NRSV vv. 7–9, emphasis added)

Here the nations are not divided according to the number of the children of Israel but rather according to the number of the gods. Whence this new reading? The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known today as the Septuagint recorded that God divided the nations “according to the number of the angels of God” (κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ; *kata arithmon angelōn theou*).<sup>48</sup> This was long assumed to be an error, and so the Masoretic Text was preferred by the translators of the KJV. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-twentieth century, however, scholars revisited this matter. Among the recovered fragments was a text (4QDeut<sup>i</sup>) giving a much earlier reading of v. 8 that significantly diverged from the Masoretic Text. Rather than dividing the nations according to the number of the children of Israel, God, in this textual witness, is said to have divided the nations according to the number of “the sons of God” (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים; *bēnê ’ēlōhîm*).<sup>49</sup> Carmel McCarthy, writing in the authoritative *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, could see no other reason for this variant than it arose through “deliberate emendation” by scribes with “theological motives.”<sup>50</sup>

But the scribal alterations did not end with v. 8. At the conclusion of the song, Moses exults, “Rejoice, O ye nations [גִּיּוֹם; *gōyîm*], with his people: for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance to his adversaries, and will be merciful unto his land, and

48. Some Septuagint witnesses read υἱὸν θεοῦ (*uiōn theou*; “sons of God”). See Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January-March 2001): 52–53.

49. 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.

50. Carmel McCarthy, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Deuteronomy* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 140–141, 152–153. On v. 8 in general see Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” 52–74.

to his people” (KJV v. 43). Again, consulting modern translations reveals a significant difference. “Praise, *O heavens*, his people, *worship him, all you gods!* For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people” (NRSV v. 43, emphasis added). The reading provided by the NRSV (among other modern translations), draws from the textual witness of 4QDeut<sup>q</sup>. As preserved in this fragment, Moses adjures the members of the divine council, identified as “gods” (אלהים; *’ēlōhîm*), to worship Yahweh. A poetic parallelism conceptually linking the “heavens” (שמים; *šāmaîm*) and the “gods” (אלהים; *’ēlōhîm*) is also evident in the Qumran version, but lost in the Masoretic reworking, which changed “heavens” to “nations” and omitted reference to the gods worshipping Yahweh altogether. The reading in 4QDeut<sup>q</sup> aligns closely with the Septuagint, which represents Moses as commanding: “Rejoice, O heavens, with him [i.e. God], and bow down before him, all you sons of God” (εὐφράνθητε, οὐρανοί, ἅμα αὐτῷ, καὶ προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ; *euphanthēte ouranoi hama autō euphanthēte ouranoi hama autō kai proskynēsatosan autō pantes uioi theou*).<sup>51</sup>

The transmission of Deuteronomy 32 indicates that the divine council is (or was) so overtly present in the text that scribes wishing to downplay the apparent polytheism undertook alterations that would make it theologically suitable for emerging orthodox trends toward a “purer” monotheism. Bernard Levinson sees in this passage “mythological imagery of God presiding over the divine council” that “almost certainly” challenged the monotheism of the copyists handling the text, which in turn “triggered the attempts to purge the text of polytheistic elements.”<sup>52</sup> Paul Sanders summarizes the current scholarly consensus on this matter nicely: “Both in v. 8b and 43a the fragments from Qumran contain references to gods beside YHWH whereas such references are not found in the [Masoretic Text] and the Samaritan Pentateuch. In the latter versions the absence of these references would seem to be due to deliberate elimination.”<sup>53</sup>

51. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘Song of Moses’ (Deuteronomy 32) from Qumran,” 13–14. See the extended discussion in Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996).

52. Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 423.

53. Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996), 250. Cf. Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 157: “Scholars now generally assume that the [Masoretic Text reading of Deuteronomy 32] is the result of adaptation of the older reading for theological reasons. Later generations would have deemed the concept expressed in these verses unacceptable.”

To summarize, the Hebrew Bible contains rich and dramatic depictions of God's *sôd*, his intimate cabinet of attending divine beings that he consults in his dealings. As we've seen, these deities are clearly depicted as existing just as much as Yahweh himself, thus negating any conventional use of "monotheism" to describe the Hebrew Bible's depiction of God. However, these deities are never said to be the objects of proper worship by the prophets who participate in the *sôd*, thus negating any use of "polytheism" or "henotheism."<sup>54</sup> If space permitted, we would look more closely at additional depictions of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible, and would explore what term(s) to use to describe the biblical understanding of God. Suffice it to say that the Hebrew Bible is saturated with descriptions of the divine council.<sup>55</sup>

### The Divine Council in the Book of Mormon

With this understanding of the divine council in mind, we now turn our attention to the presence of this council in the Book of Mormon. Before we begin our investigation, it must be acknowledged that the Book of Mormon's depiction of the divine council is neither as frequent nor explicit as the depiction in the Hebrew Bible. Possible reasons for this want of explicit detail might include the fact that, by their own admission, Book of Mormon authors and redactors were obliged to heavily abridge their accounts due to the lack of space on their writing medium (Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Mormon 8:5; 9:33–34; Ether 15:33). Another likely reason, as suggested by Mark Alan Wright, is that as Lehite prophets integrated with the predominant Mesoamerican culture around them, they began, naturally, to couch their experiences in the cultural language and

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54. Indeed, as we just saw, 4QDeut<sup>a</sup> goes so far as having Moses imploring these deities themselves to worship Yahweh in Deuteronomy 32:43. See Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), 193.

55. For an extensive look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible, see Peterson, "Ye Are Gods," 472–594. Many of the subjects discussed in this paper are more fully treated by Peterson. Another look at the divine council from a Latter-day Saint perspective is found in Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 173–98. Peterson's article approaches the subject with a stronger exegetical reading, while McConkie's article is eisegetical in nature by looking at the subject more through the lenses of modern Latter-day Saint theology. The two should therefore provide a good balance when read alongside each other.

paradigm of Mesoamerica, rather than the ancient Near East. After all, “each prophet was a product of his own culture, and the manner in which the divine was manifested to the prophets was largely defined by the semiotics of their culture.”<sup>56</sup>

Be that as it may, there are nevertheless narrative details in the Book of Mormon that bespeak a presence of the divine council. The Nephite record wastes no time in introducing the divine council to its readers, in fact. After a characteristically Near Eastern colophon,<sup>57</sup> Nephi begins his account by describing the prophetic commission of his father Lehi. Embedded within his account is specific language indicating that Lehi followed the example of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible who also received Yahweh’s *sôd* (including Lehi’s contemporary Jeremiah).

The account in 1 Nephi begins with a report of Lehi’s prophetic activity in Jerusalem on the eve of its razing by Nebuchadnezzar II, the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who suppressed an unsuccessful Judahite uprising and sacked Judah’s capital in 587 BC.

Wherefore it came to pass that my father Lehi, as he went forth, prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him, and he saw and heard much. And because of the things which he saw and heard, he did quake and tremble exceedingly. (1 Nephi 1:5–6)

What did Lehi see that was so terrible? Nephi writes that his father “saw the heavens open and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:7–8).<sup>58</sup> From the midst of these heavenly beings,

He saw one descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noonday. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed

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56. Wright, “According to Their Language, Unto Their Understanding,” 51.

57. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 17–18; John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 13–17.

58. For the intriguing suggestion that the “numberless concourses of angels” represent a heavenly prayer circle, see Hugh Nibley, “Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past: The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 2 (2010): 70.

that of the stars of the firmament. And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. (1 Nephi 1:9–11)

One of these heavenly beings, Nephi writes, “came and stood before my father and gave unto him a book and bade him that he should read” (1 Nephi 1:11).<sup>59</sup> After reading this text containing heavenly, prophetic knowledge, including knowledge that “manifested plainly the coming of a Messiah” (1 Nephi 1:19), Lehi was prompted to recommence his tumultuous prophetic career by issuing a warning against Jerusalem and her inhabitants: that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and “many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:12–13, 18–20).

Upon the completion of this revelation, Lehi was overcome with ecstasy and joyfully exclaimed: “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish” (1 Nephi 1:14). Nephi concludes the account by noting, “[Lehi’s] soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shewn unto him” (1 Nephi 1:15).

Stephen D. Ricks has called attention to the parallels between the throne-theophany of Lehi and that of Isaiah<sup>60</sup> and concludes after a point-by-point analysis that the prophetic calls in both of these texts “establishes in the minds of the people the prophet’s authority and his extraordinary standing with the Lord.”<sup>61</sup> John W. Welch, building on earlier work,<sup>62</sup> has examined Lehi’s throne theophany not just within the confines of Isaiah’s prophetic commission but also within a

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59. On the heavenly book motif in the Book of Mormon and the ancient Near East, see Brent E. McNeely, “The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 26–28.

60. Stephen D. Ricks, “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 171–90.

61. Ricks, “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John,” 187.

62. Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 67–96; John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 35–54.

broader ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>63</sup> After an illuminating analysis, Welch argues that “Lehi’s prophetic attributes can be understood and confirmed in light of classical Israelite prophecy specific to his own contemporaneous world,” and, furthermore, that “his call as a prophet in 1 Nephi 1 gives a foundation of divine authority, revelation, and guidance for everything that follows father Lehi’s posterity throughout the Book of Mormon.”<sup>64</sup>

We can therefore reasonably infer that Nephi’s quick inclusion of his father’s prophetic call and reception of the *sôd* was to immediately establish the prophetic credibility of Lehi throughout the rest of Nephi’s narrative. It provides legitimacy for Lehi’s prophetic activities, similar to the example we’ve already seen with Micaiah and Jeremiah. What’s more, with the inclusion of Lehi’s vision of the divine council at the beginning of his narrative, it seems likely that Nephi also wished to anticipate the opposition of his own brothers Laman and Lemuel to Lehi’s prophetic legitimacy (1 Nephi 2:11–13; 3:4–5).

Further insights into the prophetic commissions of Lehi and Isaiah come from David Bokovoy, whose work arguing that these are *sôd* narratives not only nicely compliments the earlier work of Ricks and Welch, but is now among the standard treatments on the subject.<sup>65</sup> Bokovoy argues:

Lehi appears, like Isaiah, as a messenger sent to represent the assembly that had convened in order to pass judgment upon Jerusalem for a violation of God’s holy covenants. Nephi’s account may represent this subtle biblical motif through a reference to Lehi assuming the traditional role of council member, praising the high god of the assembly.<sup>66</sup>

In turning to Isaiah 6 itself, we quickly discern several convergences between the two accounts. Exactly like Lehi, Isaiah is reported to have seen Yahweh “sitting on a throne, high and lofty” (Isaiah 6:1) and to have been introduced to the divine council (“Seraphs [who] were in attendance above [Yahweh]”<sup>67</sup>) who also praised Yahweh with acclamations of,

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63. John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 421–48.

64. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” 437–38.

65. David E. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 29–49.

66. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 37.

67. These seraphs are depicted as fiery attendants of Yahweh who extol Yahweh’s holiness and carry out the purification of Isaiah (Isa 6:6–7). For more

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts [יהוה צבאות; *yhwh šēbā’ōt*]; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).<sup>68</sup> The reactions of Lehi and Isaiah are similar (with both prophets reacting to their respective theophanies with wonder and terror [1 Nephi 1:6; Isaiah 6:4–5]), as are their respective commissions to pass judgment upon the wicked inhabitants of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:13–15, 18–20; Isaiah 6:9–13).

A pertinent question is if these parallels occur coincidentally or purposefully. Given Nephi’s access to Isaiah’s writings, which he quotes at length (2 Nephi 16 = Isaiah 6), and the evidence examined above, it seems highly likely that Nephi deliberately crafted, or “likened” (1 Nephi 19:23), the narrative of his father’s experience to mirror Isaiah’s. This suggests a very cogent and conscious literary development of the narrative of Lehi’s *sōd* vision. Perhaps Nephi paid careful attention to formulate his father’s vision to read like the visions of other biblical prophets, particularly Isaiah, and he established a logical beginning point that would establish Lehi as a prophet. This is not to negate the reality of Lehi’s vision or to otherwise suggest it was a merely literary fabrication but rather to say that Nephi consciously employed these literary methods in the description of his father’s experience.

Important to note at this point is Alma’s *sōd* experience reported in Alma 36, which directly quotes the text of Lehi’s throne theophany. While in his near-death state after being rebuked by an angel, Alma relates the following to his son Helaman: “Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (Alma 36:22). Thereafter Alma reported his reception of heavenly knowledge through this theophany, namely, that “inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God, ye shall prosper in the land” (see Alma 36:1, 5, 26, 30), which is what in turn prompted him to commence his missionary activities in declaring repentance. As with Isaiah and

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on the seraphim of Isaiah 6, see David G. Burke, “Seraph, Seraphim,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 687. That these seraphs constitute Yahweh’s divine council seems likely given the very similar language employed in Isaiah 6 and the divine council scene in 1 Kings 22. See the comments by Min Suc Kee, “The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 263, 269. Kee’s entire article gives a very helpful look at the divine council not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in other Canaanite and Mesopotamian religious literature.

68. The angelic song of praise in both Lehi’s and Isaiah’s experience is a literary device called the Qedussa, which is discussed by Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission,” 80–81.

Lehi, Alma was commissioned to be a prophet in the same pattern: he was called up into God’s divine council (note that Alma is said to have both seen God and been instructed by angels), given heavenly knowledge, and commissioned to preach a divine message (Alma 36:24–26; cf. Mosiah 27:32–37).<sup>69</sup> And, like Nephi, it seems that Mormon took extra care to ensure that his readers would catch the connection between Lehi’s commission and Alma’s. He even goes so far as to quote Alma as repeating the words of Lehi found on the small plates.

Continuing further into Nephi’s narrative, we turn to the account in 1 Nephi 11. In this text we read of Nephi “pondering in [his] heart” the meaning of another of his father’s many visions. Nephi is then suddenly “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1) and engages in a dialogue with “the Spirit,” who interrogates Nephi on whether he believes the vision of his father (1 Nephi 11:4). Nephi answers in the affirmative, whereupon the Spirit, like the seraphs of Isaiah 6 and the angels of 1 Nephi 1, proclaims, “Hosanna to the Lord, the Most High God, for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all” (1 Nephi 11:6). What follows is a revelation wherein Nephi is granted the same (or at least a similar) version of the vision of his father in 1 Nephi 8 and the interpretation of the symbols thereof.

Certainly there is much to be said of this account, including the fact that it captures other authentic aspects of pre-exilic Israelite religion.<sup>70</sup> We turn again to Bokovoy, who offers a reading of this text as Nephi’s own *sôd* experience.<sup>71</sup> When read in light of our understanding of the

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69. Wright and Neal Rappleye have noticed that Alma’s own experience departs from Lehi’s in one significant way. Alma’s throne theophany came after a near-death experience, which is consistent with an ancient Mesoamerican but not an ancient Near Eastern religious experience. Given Alma’s theophany occurred centuries after Nephite integration in Mesoamerica, this would be entirely expected. See Wright, “According to Their Language, Unto Their Understanding,” 58–64; Neal Rappleye, “Put Away Childish Things’: Learning to Read the Book of Mormon with Mature Historical Understanding,” presented at the 2017 FairMormon Conference, 32–33, online at [https://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Rappleye\\_2017FM\\_Presentation.pdf](https://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Rappleye_2017FM_Presentation.pdf).

70. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scriptures, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 69–82.

71. David E. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe’: Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon*



divine council, this text reveals “that Nephi’s conversation ... echoes an ancient temple motif. As part of this paradigm ... the text depicts the Spirit of the Lord in a role associated with members of the divine council in both biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions.”<sup>72</sup> Specifically, Bokovoy argues that the exchange between Nephi and the Spirit mirror other biblical and ancient Near Eastern *sôd* dialogues. What’s more, the exchange in 1 Nephi 11, when coupled with the accounts of King Benjamin (Mosiah 5) and the brother of Jared (Ether 2–3) constitute a type scene or “template for depicting an official encounter between witness and worshiper in preparation for the introduction to advanced revelatory truths” that is recurrent throughout the Book of Mormon.<sup>73</sup> In the case of the account in 1 Nephi 11, Bokovoy concludes:

Nephi participated in a celestial ascent to an exceedingly high mountain possessed by the most high God. The description of this experience in 1 Nephi 11 shares much in common with traditional Near Eastern imagery concerning the divine assembly and invocation of heavenly beings as council witnesses. In this context, Nephi’s exchange with the Spirit of the Lord provides a dramatic portrayal of the faith necessary to receive introduction to advanced spiritual truth. Through his testimony, as born to the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi proved himself worthy to pass by the heavenly sentinel and enter the realm of greater light and knowledge.<sup>74</sup>

Nephi’s inclusion of the account of his own *sôd* experience can further be seen to perpetuate the same goal as the inclusion of his father’s. Remembering that one aspect of the *sôd* narrative is to establish the legitimacy of a prophet’s calling, particularly in a time of controversy, this casts Nephi’s account of his *sôd* experience in a new light. In this instance the controversy arose between Nephi and his elder brothers over matters relating to the interpretation and meaning of their father’s vision. Upon returning to his family after his sequestered vision, Nephi was “grieved” to discover that his brothers “were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them.” The cause of this contention was due to the esoteric nature of Lehi’s vision, “which was hard to be understood save a man should inquire of

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*Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23.

72. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe,’” 1.

73. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

74. *Ibid.*, 22.

the Lord” (1 Nephi 15:3–4). “Behold,” the brothers lamented concerning aspects their father’s vision, “we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken” (1 Nephi 15:7). Nephi informed his brothers that their ignorance stemmed from the fact that, unlike him, they had not inquired of God, and therefore were not privileged to receive the requisite knowledge needed to understand their father’s vision.

Nephi thus established his own credibility as his father’s prophetic successor. Having participated in the *sôd*, Nephi was granted the heavenly secrets needed to know and understand the apocalyptic visions granted to his father (1 Nephi 15:8–11). These same heavenly secrets were not imparted to Nephi’s brothers, who were barred from participating in the *sôd* because of “the hardness of [their] hearts” (1 Nephi 15:10). “Do ye not remember,” Nephi urged his brothers, “the thing which the Lord hath said? — if ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you” (1 Nephi 15:11).

To cap off his record, Nephi earnestly implored his readers to become fluent in “the tongue of angels” (2 Nephi 31:13–14; 32:2–3), which Neal Rappleye has convincingly argued was the young prophet’s idiomatic language for entering the presence of the heavenly assembly and becoming a deified member therein.<sup>75</sup> This “democratization,” we might call it, of the *sôd* experience would have been radical by the standards of Nephi’s pre-exilic Israelite religious culture, given that the *sôd* was reserved for prophets, but by his own generous standard (cf. 2 Nephi 26:23–33) as well as the standard of what would eventually become idealist Nephite egalitarianism, this is understandable. “Nephi makes it clear that he himself has stood in this council, has become one of the heavenly hosts, and now speaks with the tongue of angels. Nephi also makes it clear, however, that this is not merely the prerogative of the prophets. Nephi’s carefully crafted narrative teaches that all are both *invited* and *commanded* to follow the path that leads to entrance into the Lord’s presence, and ultimately grants membership into the heavenly assembly.”<sup>76</sup>

Continuing further into the Book of Mormon, we discover the account in Mosiah 22 that serves as a council text on a temporal level. In ancient Near Eastern thought, the earthly court of the king was (at least ideally) the earthly counterpart to God’s heavenly council. In this

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75. Neal Rappleye, “With the Tongue of Angels’: Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 303–323.

76. Rappleye, “With the Tongue of Angels,” 323, emphasis in original.

chapter, Ammon and Limhi “consult[ed]” (one could say “counseled”) with the people as to how they should “deliver themselves out of bondage” (Mosiah 22:1). The people “gather[ed] themselves together” and deliberated for some time, with Gideon eventually presenting himself before the king with a desire to “be [the king’s] servant and deliver this people out of bondage” (Mosiah 22:4). Gideon successfully pled his case (Mosiah 22:5–8), and was commissioned to be an agent of the king’s in delivering a perfidious tribute of wine to their Lamanite captors to incapacitate them during the people’s escape (Mosiah 22:9–16). The format of the proceedings of the council scene in Mosiah 22 follows that of the divine council scenes in 1 Kings 22 and Isaiah 6 and 40 nicely, albeit on a temporal level.<sup>77</sup>

Another possible divine council narrative can be found in Helaman 10, although with some irregularities. Regardless of these irregularities, this narrative is worth looking at, as it offers some details that seem to indicate a divine council scene. In this account, Nephi, the son of Helaman, returned defeated after being rejected as a prophet by the people of Nephi: “And it came to pass that there arose a division among the people, insomuch that they divided hither and thither and went their ways” (Helaman 10:1). This is a classic set up for a divine council narrative, where controversy arises that will eventually need settling by prophetic intervention. Nephi, in retreat, retired “towards his own house” and began pondering “upon the things which the Lord had shewn unto him” (Helaman 10:2). As Nephi pondered his situation “a voice came unto him” and delivered divine consolation (Helaman 10:3). What followed was God’s reaffirmation of Nephi’s prophetic call (cf. Helaman 7:1–2). “Behold, thou art Nephi and I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels that ye shall have power over this people” (Helaman 7:6). Note that God was said to have declared this in his council of angels, a significant detail that indicates the presence of the divine council in the text.

What makes this possible divine council account irregular is that Nephi is never explicitly said to have seen God and his council but rather that a voice merely came to him. This silence does not entirely rule out the possibility that Nephi *saw* the council as he *heard* the voice, but the lack of an affirmatively explicit narrative detail is such that it cannot be positively said that he did. Another irregularity is that God, and not one of his divine messengers, is said to have given Nephi his call directly. In the examples

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77. I am grateful to my friend Neal Rappleye for introducing me to this reading of Mosiah 22.

previously examined, it is one of the messengers of the council that delivers the commission. Notwithstanding these irregularities, what follows the commission is like the prophetic call narratives examined in this paper, as Nephi “did return unto the multitudes . . . and began to declare unto them the word of the Lord” straightway after his theophany (Helaman 10:12).

### Conclusion

Much more could be said about the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon than this brief survey will allow. Besides the examples cited in this paper, there remain other narratives possibly depicting the divine council in the Book of Mormon that deserve our close attention (including 3 Nephi 17:11–25; 28). Additionally, the texts discussed above clearly indicate the presence of a divine plurality. These texts urge us to be more nuanced in how we define our terms such as “monotheism” and “polytheism.” Seemingly Trinitarian passages in the Book of Mormon (e.g. 2 Nephi 31:21; 3 Nephi 11:27; Mormon 7:7), for instance, are counterweighed by the passages above that depict the divine council.<sup>78</sup>

However we might understand or define these terms, the Book of Mormon very clearly portrays the divine council in such a way that indicates its close familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite religion. This, accordingly, should not only help us understand the Book of Mormon’s teachings about the nature of God and raise our appreciation for it as an ancient record, but also entice us to look more carefully for the presence of the divine council in other scriptural texts.<sup>79</sup>

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78. See the discussion in David L. Paulsen and Ari D. Bruening, “The Social Model of the Trinity in 3 Nephi,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), 191–233.

79. I have made some initial steps to do just such in Stephen O. Smoot, “I am a Son of God?: Moses’ Ascension into the Divine Council,” in *2012 BYU Religious Education Student Symposium* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 129–143; “Council, Chaos, & Creation in the Book of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

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