

## The Heavenly Council in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament \*

by [Paul B. Sumner](#)

This paper illustrates the value of *applied Biblical Theology*.

The Hebrew Bible is a book of concrete images and symbols. The late scholar of Medieval English literature C. S. Lewis said, “Symbols are the natural speech of the soul, a language older and more universal than words.”<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Hill noted, “Belief strives for embodiment in conventional and tangible modes of expression. For this reason, symbolism has been a part of biblical religion from its beginning because it is the vehicle of revelation and the language of faith. As vehicles of revelation, symbols summarize and interpret human experience and interaction with God.”<sup>2</sup>

Those who have studied the Hebrew Bible know that symbols, metaphors and images are the dialect of the historians, poets, and theologians of ancient Israel. God is described in terms of everyday creation reality, not in philosophical abstractions.

It’s my belief that *imagery conveys theology*. And as I hope to show in this paper, the symbolic imagery of the heavenly council conveys a great deal of theology.

The biblical commentator Patrick Miller has said the council imagery is “one of the central cosmological symbols of the Old Testament.” That is, it explains the “machinery and systems” of the universe; how God accomplishes his will using his semi-divine servants.<sup>3</sup>

### The Council Defined

As I define it, the heavenly council is *a symbolic ruling body consisting of God as the supreme monarch with an assembly of supernatural servants gathered around his throne in a heavenly palace*.

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (ed. W. Hooper, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954, 1966), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew E. Hill, *NIV Commentary Series: 1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 246–47.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol,” *Horizon* 9 (1987): 54.

By using the word “symbolic” I do not imply the Council is not real. I mean the imagery is analogical or metaphorical and depicts actual realities in the divine world.

Put simply: Yahveh<sup>4</sup> is King and he commands divine servants to do his will.

How did Israel know about this heavenly council? The Bible implies they knew from accounts of visionary visitations by prophets. Modern commentators call these visits “throne visions”—firsthand reports of the heavenly council in session. Not many visions occur in the Hebrew Bible, but they seem to be the well-spring for Israel’s conception of God.

### Thesis Query

My thesis question is this: *If the heavenly council concept and imagery were so important to the biblical writers, were they also important to Jews in post-biblical times?*

To anticipate my conclusion, let me affirm: The council imagery *does* continue into Second Temple Jewish literature, including the New Testament. In fact, echoing Pat Miller’s comment about the centrality of the council imagery in the Hebrew Bible, I propose that *the council imagery is a central theological—even Christological—symbol in the New Testament*. In time, however, the imagery was suppressed in rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity.

### Biblical Evidence of the Council

Let’s hear a few references to the council in the Hebrew text. The phrase “heavenly council” is not actually biblical; the phrase “divine council” or “divine assembly” is. It comes from Psalm 82:1:

Elohim has taken his place in the divine council

[עֲדַת־אֱלֹהִים *adat el*];

In the midst of the *elohim* he holds judgment.

In Psalm 89 we read:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Yahveh,

Your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones

[קְהַל־קְדוֹשִׁים *qebal qedoshim*].

For who in the skies can be compared to Yahveh?

Who among the sons of God [בְּנֵי־אֱלֹהִים *benei elim*, heavenly beings]

is like Yahveh,

A God greatly feared in the secret council of the holy ones

[סֹד־קְדוֹשִׁים *sod qedoshim*],

Great and awesome above all that are around him? (vv. 5-7)

Many are familiar with Job 1:6:

Now there was a day when the sons of God [בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים *benei ha’elohim*]

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use Sefardic Hebrew transliterations. Thus, the Tetragrammaton is spelled YHVH or enlarged as Yahveh.

came to present themselves before Yahveh,  
and the satan [הַשָּׂטָן] also came among them.

In Nehemiah 9:6 the redeemed exiles from Babylon praise God with these words:

You are he, Yahveh, alone,  
You have made the heavens,  
The heaven of heavens with all their host, . . .  
The heavenly host [הַשָּׁמַיִם הַשְּׂבָאִים *tzeva hashamayim*] bows down before you.

### Terms for the Gathering

There are three terms for the council gathering: עֵדָה *edah*, קָהָל *qahal*, and סוּד *sod*.

*Edah* means congregation, assembly, or company. It's also used for the congregation of Israel. *Qahal* means to gather together. It parallels the later Greek *ekklesia*.

*Sod* is a wonderfully rich word. It designates a king's inner circle—his closest friends and counselors who know his mind and discuss his plans. To participate in the *sod* of Yahveh meant profound privilege. In the Gospel of John, Yeshua is described as “the one and only [unique] Son,” the *monogenes* (1:14), who resides on “the bosom of the Father” (1:18).<sup>5</sup> Verse 18 seems to reflect Hebrew *sod*-imagery: Yeshua knows best the mind of God because he has unique place in the divine *sod*.

Daniel 7:10 mentions a heavenly “court.” The Aramaic noun דִּינָב *dinab* signifies a “council of judges” (Koehler-Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 1065). Depicting God as a time-transcending Judge sitting among other judges is a striking image. It echoes forensic scenes in Isaiah 41, as we'll see later.

### Terms for the Members

Council members have several names or titles. They are: holy ones, spirits, messengers, ministers, servants, those on high, princes—and other names.<sup>6</sup> The diversity suggests differing roles in their relationship to Yahveh in his diverse roles as King, Judge, Lord, and Warrior.

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<sup>5</sup> At John 1:18 I read *monogenes huios* (“one and only Son”), instead of *monogenes theos* (“unique or only begotten God”), common in most translations. In Johannine works, *monogenes* echoes the Hebrew *yachid*, the term for a unique or precious child or soul (John 1:14; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). J. H. Thayer said the reading “only begotten God” [*monogenes theos*] “is foreign to John's mode of thought and speech, dissonant and harsh. [It] appears to owe its origin to a dogmatic zeal which broke out soon after the early days of the church” (*Greek-English Lexicon* [1885], 418).

<sup>6</sup> Holy ones (Deut 33:2; Hos 12:1; Zech 14:5); spirits (1 Kgs 22:21-23; Ps 104:4); messengers/angels (Ps 91:11; 103:20); ministers (Ps 103:21; 104:4); servants (Job 4:18); those on high (Job 21:22); princes (Jos 5:14; Dan 10:13), to name a few.

God’s role as warrior is revealed by his name “LORD of hosts”— יהוה צבאות *Yahveh Tzava’ot*—literally, Yahveh of armies.<sup>7</sup> The name is central to what has been called “Zion Theology”—a constellation of doctrines that says God will protect the House of David and the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion with his heavenly armies.

What’s most striking about some titles for the council members is their unabashed affirmation of semi-divinity. These beings are openly referred to as *elohim*—gods, divine beings. They are also *benei elohim*, *benei elim*, and *benei elyon* (sons of God, sons of the Most High) (Gen 6:2; Ps 8:6; 29:1; 82:6; 86:8; 89:7; 97:7; 138:1; Job 38:7). Such terms are borderline dangerous because they closely mirror ancient Near Eastern pantheons where the father deity is surrounded by his children deities, the lesser gods.

### Israel’s Guarded Heritage

But the Israelites weren’t embarrassed by this. They firmly held onto the council imagery throughout their history. It apparently posed no threat to Yahveh’s position. For he was *ba-Elohim*, which means “the (only real) God.”

There is a strong *anti-myth* element in the Bible that permeates the background of the creation and flood stories in Genesis 1–11. God is not the head of a pantheon of deities as in Babylon, Egypt or Canaan. There are no attempted coup d’état’s, as when Baal tried to wrest the throne from his father El, the chief god of Canaan.

In the Bible, the “sub-elohim” (so to speak) are merely God’s servants and messengers (*malakhim*; Grk. *angeli*, angels). Though supremely powerful, they are not worshiped. Some apostates in Israel did bow to “the sun, moon and stars” (Deut 4:19)—apparently rebellious *elohim* posing as heavenly bodies. But loyal Hebrews and later Israelites worshiped only Yahveh.

### Thoroughly Hebrew

References to the heavenly council or the King’s throne room occur in every portion of the tri-fold Hebrew Bible (Gen 1:26; 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Ps 89:5–7); in every literary genre, including *narrative* (Exod 24:9–10), *historical* (1 Kgs 22:19–23), *prophetic* (Isa 6:1–8; Jer 23:18–22), *poetic* (Job 1:6–12), *liturgical* (Ps 103:19–22), *wisdom* (Job 15:8), and *visionary* (Ezek 1; Zech 3:1–5); from the earliest (Exod 15:11; Deut 32:8 LXX; Ps 29:1) to the latest dated materials (Neh 9:6; Dan 7:9–14); and in texts spanning all of time: from the primeval moments of creation (Gen 1:26; Job 38:1–7) to the eschatological arrival of God’s kingdom (Dan 7:9–14).

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<sup>7</sup> The prophet Joel pleads: “Bring down your warriors [*gibborim*], O Yahveh” (Joel 4:11 [Eng. 3:11]). God’s “troops [*gedudim*]” (Job 25:3) or “mighty ones [*gibborim*]” (Isa 13:3; Ps 103:20) are depicted as advancing divisions of “chariots” (Ps 68:17; 2 Kgs 6:17).

God’s army (*tzava*; Jos 5:14-15; Ps 148:2; Neh 9:6) is darkly mirrored by the heavenly hosts (*tzava’ot*) (sun, moon, stars) who receive idolatrous worship (Isa 24:21; 34:3; Jer 19:13).

Yahveh and his heavenly entourage as *concept* and *image* were woven deeply into Israel's theological tapestry. As Th. Vriezen noted: "Far from clashing with monotheism this conception lays the greatest stress on the Majesty of Yahveh. Yahveh is a unique God, but He is not alone."<sup>8</sup>

### Court Transcripts

The council concept throws light on what I call the "Genesis Plurals." These are the three passages in which God refers to "us" and "our." "Let us make *adam* in **our** image" (Gen 1:26); "Behold, the *adam* has become like one of **us**" (Gen 3:22); "Come, let **us** go down" (Gen 11:7).<sup>9</sup> From the very start of the canon, we encounter allusions to God and his council. Just *whom* the council consists of isn't stated. We have to determine that from other texts.

Council imagery also appears in the forensic scene in Isaiah 41 where God summons the foreign gods to show up in his court and prove they truly are deities. Listen to God's taunt and imagine him beckoning with his hand to those in his throne room:

"Present your case," Yahveh says.  
 "Bring forward your strong arguments," the King of Jacob says.  
 "Let them bring forth and declare to **us** what is going to take place . . .  
 that **we** may consider them and know their outcome . . .  
 that **we** may know you are *elohim* . . .  
 that **we** may anxiously look about **us**." (vv. 21-23)

This is satire. Nonetheless, it exists as a conceptual reality for the prophet. The imagery served a polemical function against the "no-gods" (בְּלֹא אֱלֹהִים *belo elohim*, Jer 5:7) and "demons" (שְׂדֵימִים *sbedim*, Deut 32:17) of Israel's neighbors, who were in thrall to these imitation gods. The council concept wasn't a literary or theological construct; it was a living element of Israel's religious system.

In the Bible, the beings around Yahveh are *elohim*: they are powerful entities. They're also holy because they are in the presence of the Holy One himself. That's why humans fear these *elohim*. Those who offer worship to the *elohim* around Yahveh are idolaters.

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<sup>8</sup> Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (2d ed., Newton, Mass.: Branford, 1970), 328.

<sup>9</sup> On these plural pronouns as allusions to the heavenly council, see [The Genesis Plurals](#) [in the [Hebrew Studies](#) portal]. Franz Delitzsch says these verses manifest a "communicative plural" (God conferring with his council) (*A New Commentary on Genesis*, 1888). Bruce Waltke says "God is addressing the angels or heavenly court" (*Genesis: A Commentary*, 2001).

## Throne Visions

As I said, awareness of the great assembly of *elohim* was obtained through visionary entry into Elohim's court. There are six passages in the Bible that can be classified as "throne visions": Exodus 24:9–11; 1 Kings 22:19–23; Isaiah 6:1–8; Ezekiel 1, 10; Zechariah 3:1–5; and Daniel 7:9–14. Here are some facts about them.

1) Each vision mentions or alludes to a *throne*, whether it's resting on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:10) or occupying the Jerusalem temple (Isa 6:1) or lifted on the wings of the soaring *keruvim* (Ezek 1:26–28). Yahveh's throne is the seat of all government, and it's occupied by only by one deity.

2) They share a common theme: the *kingship of Yahveh*. In Isaiah's vision, he explicitly says, "My eyes have seen the King, Yahveh of armies" (6:5).

3) Each vision (except Exod 24) refers to heavenly beings: *ruchot* spirits (1 Kgs 22), *serafim* (Isa 6), *keruvim* cherubim (Ezek 1, 10), *ba-satan* and the *malakh* or angel of Yahveh (Zech 3), and "myriads upon myriads" (Dan 7).

4) Throne visions historically *occur at crisis times* when affirmation of God's kingship is urgent to the nation. For example—just after the exodus-birth of the nation (Exod 24), or when a king died (Isa 6) or was about to die (1 Kgs 22), or when God was about to install new leaders (Zech 3), or when the people were thrust into exile and desperately needed to know they weren't abandoned (Ezek 1).

5) The visions also affirm *God's choice of human leaders*, as when Moses, Aaron, and 72 elders ascended the mountain (Exod 24), or when the post-exilic community was told that a Levite, not a son of the House of David, would oversee the restoration (Zech 3), or when, in an unknown apocalyptic future, a Davidic son would have absolute rule (Dan 7) not only over Israel but the whole earth!

6) The visions *confirm the authority* of those to whom God granted access to His council. The true prophet is one who hears the Word or Plan of Yahveh in the Sod, then delivers it to Israel, saying, "Thus says the LORD" (Jer 23:18, 22).

### David, a Prophet?

Some passages in the Hebrew Bible imply that King David had Council access. Second Samuel 23 refers to *mashiach* David as "the man who was raised on High" (to the Council?), who said of himself, "The Ruach of Yahveh spoke by me, and his word was on my tongue" (2 Sam 23:1–2). Some men called David God's "angel," or a messenger of the Court (2 Sam 14:17, 20; 19:27).

Note Jeremiah's rhetorical question on how to discern a true prophet of God: "Who has stood in the council (*sod*) of Yahveh, that he should see and hear his word?" (Jer 23:18). In later eras, a prophet could be called an "angel of Yahveh" since he delivered God's council decisions (Hag 1:13; Mal 2:7, cf. 3:1). David's affirmation about himself is that of a prophet, not merely a shepherd king.

## Unique Visions

While the six throne visions share common imagery and themes, each is also unique.

Each comes at a significant historical-theological moment and is orchestrated by God for those occasions. The visions aren't surreptitious stolen peeks behind the divine curtain by would-be prophets. They can't be conjured for personal entertainment or self-aggrandizement. Visions are given only to those invited. Incidentally, reporting the contents of a throne vision to the authorities can get you accused of blasphemy or even killed—as the cases of Micaiah ben Imlah in the eighth century (1 Kgs 22) and those of Yeshua (Matt 26:63–68) and Stephen (Acts 7:55–60) in the first century all attest.

## The Watershed

The throne vision in Daniel 7:9–14 is a watershed in Israelite theology. Here the courtiers of the “Ancient of Days” sweep into the royal hall as “the clouds of heaven,” escorting someone who looks human, and “present” him to the King and his assembly of *100 million* (lit. Aramaic).

Some commentators say this **בְּרֵאשִׁית** *bar enash*—son of mortal man—is the archangel Michael.<sup>10</sup> But in the book of Daniel, divine beings are classed as *bar elahin*, sons of God (Dan 3:25), not *bar enash*, son of man. The Aramaic *enash* connotes “mortal man,” as does Hebrew *enosh*.

Given the theological thrust of Daniel, I believe this Bar Enash is a *messianic son of David* who receives the kingdom as a co-ruler with God, as outlined in ancient Davidic Theology.<sup>11</sup> But—he is also *another Adam*, one given authority over all creation, a role originally intended for the Adam in Genesis.<sup>12</sup>

The council imagery of Daniel 7 struck deep, lasting roots in Israel. As Peter Hayman observes,

It is hardly ever appropriate to use the term monotheism to describe the Jewish idea of God. From the book of Daniel on, nearly every variety of Judaism maintained the pattern of the supreme God plus his vice-regent/vizier.... Needless to say, this situation left many Jews confused, especially about the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 304–10; idem, “The Danielic Son of Man,” in *The Scepter and the Star (The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature)* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 173–94 (176).

<sup>11</sup> Some elements of [Davidic Theology](#) [[Hebrew Studies](#) portal] include: David is God's son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7, 12; 89:26–27); David sits next to God in rule (Ps 57:1; 80:17; 91:1, 110:1–2); David is “God” (Ps 45:6; 89:27); David is God's “angel” (1 Sam 29:9; Zech 12:8); David will rule the whole earth (Isa 11:10; Ps 2:8; 72:8); David's rule is eternal (2 Sam 7:12–16; Ps 72:17; Dan 7:14). On this theme see John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (2d ed., Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> On an Adam–David link compare Gen 1:26–28; Ps 8:4–6; 89:20, 26–27; 110:1.

identity of the number two in the hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

## Second Temple Jewish Literature

Many Second Temple era documents report trips to heaven and visions of the holy temple and its occupants via an Ezekiel-like chariot. These *Merkavah* (Heb. chariot) visions were popular among Jewish mystics and later kabbalists.

(1) In the Pseudepigrapha, quite often a famous patriarch such as Enoch, Abraham or Moses gains access to the heavenly King. In the “Parables” or “Similitudes” of *1 Enoch* (a section of the book now usually dated near the fall of Jerusalem in 70), we find visions of God and his Messiah, the Son of Man or Chosen One, sitting next to God (*1 En* 45:4; 46:1–3; 48:6; 52:4; 62:7).

In other documents, angels such as Michael or the superior angel Yao’el (“Yah is God”) are seen on or near God’s throne.

2) Qumran Cave 4 gave us a treasure trove of materials about what goes on in heaven during worship services conducted by seven angelic priests. The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q400–407) are stunningly elaborate about this. In another document we have the very words of Michael the archangel: “I am counted among the gods and my dwelling-place is in the holy congregation.... I am counted among the gods and my glory is with the sons of the king” (4Q491 frag. 11).<sup>14</sup>

In 11QMelch, Melchizedek is a heavenly priest who stands in for God as eschatological judge. As such, he is called “Elohim.”<sup>15</sup>

Just how the authors of these documents knew about the goings-on in the throne room is unstated. They don’t declare themselves to be prophets or introduce their visions with the biblical idiom, “Behold, I saw...”

3) Septuagint manuscripts contain two interesting variants along these lines. In Isaiah 9:5, the messianic figure is called “the Messenger of the Great Council [*megales boules angelos*].” And Psalm 110:3 alludes to the divine origin of the Lord (*kurios*) seated beside God. He is “begotten” by God “among the splendor of the holy ones.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 1–15 (2, 11).

<sup>14</sup> From Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill; 1994; Grand Rapids, 1996), 118.

<sup>15</sup> See [Melchizedek: Angel, Man, or Messiah? \(11QMelch/11Q13\)](#) [in the [Dead Sea Scrolls portal](#)].

<sup>16</sup> At Ps 109:3 [MT 110:3] the LXX reads:

Among the splendors of the holy ones,  
From the womb of the dawn,  
I have begotten you.

εν ταις λαμπροτησιν των αγιων  
εκ γαστος προ εωσφορου  
εξεγεννησα σε

## Council Imagery in New Testament

### Psalm 110:1

Verse one of this psalm is a very important Hebrew Bible text used in the New Testament.

Yahveh said to my Adon, “Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”<sup>17</sup>

The original psalm dates from the monarchy period when the House of David flourished. Thus, for a thousand years or so before Yeshua, the idea that a son of David would sit next to God as co-ruler was a well-known ideal among biblically-informed Jews.

Yet when Yeshua at his trial identified himself as the “Adon” (Lord) of Psalm 110 and as Daniel’s “Son of Man,” the high priest denounced him for blasphemy (Matt 26:63–66). But there was none—scripturally speaking.

### Throne Visions

The throne visions in the New Testament convey the same imagery.

In **Acts 7**, just before dying as a martyr, Stephen saw “the glory of God” and “Yeshua...the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (vv. 55-56). This image reflects both Daniel 7:13–14 (Ancient of Days and Bar Enash) and Psalm 110:1 (Yahveh and his Adon).

The multiple visions in the book of **Revelation** also attest to the same reality. In this image-filled book we see the full complement of the heavenly council: God, the Lamb (Yeshua), and numerous divine beings and human martyrs. The latter are gathered around the throne and worship (only) God and the Lamb. Nothing’s substantially different from the visions in the Hebrew Bible (particularly Daniel 7), except for the specific identification of God’s co-ruler.

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under  
the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying:

**“To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,**  
be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” (Rev 5:13)

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The late David Flusser believed the reading “I have begotten you” was original, but Jewish scribes attempted to suppress it by changing “I have begotten you” to “your youth.” The difference is slight in Hebrew. The Masoretic text reads: יְלִידְתֶּךָ *yaldutecha* (your youth); but several mss (BHS, BHL) read: יְלִידִי *yeliditicha* (I begot you). D. Flusser, “Melchizedek and the Son of Man,” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 192.

<sup>17</sup> Ps 110:1 imagery is seen in places such as: Matt 22:43-44; 26:64; Acts 2:33, 36; 7:55-56; Eph 1:20, 22; Heb 10:12-13; 1 Pet 3:22. For the best discussion of these passages see David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand of God: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBL Monograph 18; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

Like the visions in the Hebrew Bible, these visions come at *crisis moments* when God or Messiah's lordship is put to the test (times of persecution at the hands of beasts). The visions also *validate the authority* of both Stephen and John as prophets: spokesmen of the Council. And their visions *confirm* that the crucified and resurrected *Yeshua does in fact have a place* in heaven near the Throne.

These visions also have an anti-myth, anti-idolatry tone. The beings present in God's royal hall are not themselves objects of worship. Only the Lamb and "the One who sits on the throne" are so honored—by all the heavenly beings. There is no honor given to saints from ancient Israel or the new Messianic family belonging to Yeshua.

### Paul

Paul periodically alludes to the dual image of God and his *Lord*.

Nearly every letter of his begins with the salutation, "Grace to you and peace from the God the Father *and the Lord*, Yeshua Messiah." He writes of how God "raised him [Messiah] from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" and "put all things in subjection under his feet" (Eph 1:20, 22; 1 Cor 15:27; cf. Ps 8:6).

Paul alludes to the Daniel 7 throne scene when writing to Timothy: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Messiah Yeshua and of the chosen angels" (1 Tim 5:21). This also echoes statements by Yeshua: "Whoever acknowledges me in the presence of others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge in the presence of God's angels"; "I will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels" (Luke 12:8; Rev 3:5).

### John

In the gospel of John, there are several allusions to the concept of God's heavenly *sod*, his intimate circle.

**Near God's Mind.** Yeshua—God's one and only (*monogenes*)—is said to have been "in the bosom of the Father" and is thus best able to "explain him" (John 1:18). The bosom houses the heart, which in Hebrew thinking is the seat of thought and planning, not emotion. God's *sod* is usually reserved for his prophets: those who hear the council discussions and are dispatched to declare his word to his people (Amos 3:7) and enact his will (Ps 103:20-21).

But the council is also opened to others: "The *sod* of the LORD is for those who fear him; to them he makes known [the deeper meanings and blessings of] his covenant" (Ps 25:14). Job once lamented about days gone by "when the friendship [*sod, intimate council*] of God was over my tent" (Job 29:4). If access to the *Sod* were given to Job and the prophets, how much more to the Son?

**Beside God.** Throughout the gospel of John, the Greek preposition *para* is used to describe Yeshua's prior position *beside* God. He was "the Only One from beside the Father"; "the One who is from beside God...has seen the Father"; "I am from

beside him, and he sent me”; “I came forth from beside the Father” (John 1:14; 6:46; 7:29; 16:27). He was also “with” [*pros*] God (John 1:1, 2; 1 John 1:2).

**Glory.** As Moses, Ezekiel and Stephen all attest, God’s heavenly presence is surrounded with “glory” (Exod 33:22; Ezek 1:28; Acts 7:55). To this environment, Yeshua seeks to return after his resurrection: “Father, glorify me alongside (*para*) yourself. Give me the same glory I had beside (*para*) you before the world existed” (John 17:5).

**God-given Authority.** In Daniel 7, the Ancient of Days gives authority to the *Bar Enash*, the Son of Man, to rule the earth. Thus, Yeshua tells his disciples, “He [God] gave him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:27). During a prayer, he says to God, “Father...you have given [me] authority over all people” (John 17:1,2). At the end of Matthew, he says, “All authority has been given to me in Heaven and on earth”; 28:18.

## Official Reactions to Council Concepts

### Rabbinic Judaism

This imagery of God and a companion Lord eventually became problematic to rabbinic orthodoxy.

As early as the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), we find condemnation of what it calls a belief in “Many or Two Powers.”<sup>18</sup>

[A single man only was first created] for the sake of peace in the human race, that no man might say to his fellow, “My ancestor was greater than thine ancestor”, and that the heretics [*minim*, Jewish followers of Yeshua] should not say, “There are **many powers** [*reshu’ot*] in heaven.” (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5, Blackman trans.)

He who says there are **Two Powers** in heaven is answered: Has it not elsewhere been said: “And there is no God with me.” (Sifre on Deuteronomy 379)

Later talmudic commentators typically repeat earlier warnings and interpret Psalm 110:1 as a reference to God and either Abraham, David or the nation Israel (b. Nedarim 32b; b. Sanhedrin 108b; Midrash on Psalms 18, §32). But not all agreed. A few rabbis imply that the “Lord” next to God in verse 1 was *the Messiah*.

**And your staff** [Gen 38:18] alludes to the royal Messiah, as in the verse, *The staff of your strength the LORD will send out of Zion* (Psalm 110:2). [Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 85, 9]

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<sup>18</sup> For example: See also b. Sanh. 38a; b. Megillah 25a; Midr. Rab. Gen. 1:7; Midr. Rab. Deut. 2:33; Pesiqta Rabbati 20, 4; and *3 Enoch* 16:1-5. On the Two Powers in rabbinic literature, see Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven (Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism)* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

**And the staff of Aaron budded** [Num 17:23 Heb; 17:8 Eng]... That same staff also is destined to be held in the hand of the King Messiah (may it be speedily in our days!); as it says, *The staff of your strength the LORD will send out of Zion: Rule in the midst in your enemies* (Psalm 110:2). [Midrash Rabbah, Numbers 18:23]

But the imagery of Daniel 7 became too dangerous. Eventually, rabbis denounced as blasphemy identifying *Bar Enash* as the *Son of David*, i.e., the Messiah (b. Hagigah 14a; b. Sanhedrin 38b).

But how explain **till thrones were placed**? [Daniel 7:9] — One [throne] was for Himself and one for David. Even as it has been taught: One was for Himself and one for David: this is R. Akiba's view. R. Jose protested to him: Akiba, how long will you profane the *Shechinah*? Rather, one [throne] for justice, and the other for mercy. [b. Sanhedrin 38b]

To downplay Daniel's prophetic authority, the rabbis broke with *previous* Jewish tradition by rejecting him as a prophet.<sup>19</sup> It's also possible they disenfranchised the book of Daniel and moved it into the last, least authoritative section of the tri-fold Hebrew Bible, the Writings—where it remains today.

### Post-Nicean Christianity

Similarly, and ironically, Psalm 110 and Daniel 7—so important in the New Testament—were given no authoritative place among the theologians who crafted the [Nicean, Chalcedonian, and Athanasian creeds](#).<sup>20</sup> To bolster the content of these creeds, some zealous Christian scribes altered their Greek NT manuscripts in places to transform the original Heavenly Council imagery of God-and-Lord into more orthodox trinitarian patterns. Examples:

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<sup>19</sup> Early, *pre-Talmudic* Judaism viewed Daniel as a prophet. Evidence includes: (1) in the LXX, Daniel is in the Prophets portion; (2) Qumran 4Q174 II.4 (“Florilegium”) reads: “This is the time of which it is written in the book of Daniel, the prophet”; (3) Yeshua says: “the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet” (Matt 24:15); (4) Josephus says: [Daniel] is “one of the greatest of the prophets...a prophet of good things” (Ant. 10.7 §266–268).

<sup>20</sup> [In the [Monotheism](#) portal.] In contrast to the evolving trinitarian creeds, we have witness to the beliefs of Jewish believers in Yeshua. The early Nazareans (as opposed to heretical Ebionites) are said to have “proclaim[ed] one God and his Son Jesus Christ” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29, 7, 3). Quoted in Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity (From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century)* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 33.

Alan Segal (*Two Powers*, 154) says the debates over “Two Powers” (God and a Second) occurred in the synagogues and academies of Palestine (not Babylonia), suggesting it was the Jewish disciples of Yeshua who were engaged in the debates.

Matthew 6:13 — “Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory **of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** for ever. Amen.”

1 Corinthians 8:6 — “For us there is but one God, the Father...and one Lord, Yeshua Messiah. [*Addition: ... and one Holy Spirit.*]

Hebrews 12:23-24 — “You have come to...God...to the spirits of just men...to Yeshua.” [*Change: “You have come to...God...to the Spirit...to Yeshua.”*]

1 John 5:7 — “**There are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.**”

### Reopening Court Documents

In summary, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant theologians joined orthodox Rabbinic teachers in a common effort to abandon and suppress a central cosmological symbol of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and a central Christological symbol of the New. That’s why, in my view, Jewish and Christian interpreters have given so little, serious attention to the Heavenly Council.

#### ■ Paul Sumner

<http://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/hebrew/council-2024.pdf>

This article is a condensed and edited version of a 5-chapter thesis entitled “Visions of the Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible” (1991/2013). You may access individual chapters at:

<https://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/hebrew/divinecouncil-ch1.pdf>

<https://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/hebrew/divinecouncil-ch2.pdf>

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