

Visions of the Heavenly Council in the Hebrew Bible *

by Paul 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 literature C. S. Lewis said, “Symbols are the natural speech of the soul, a language older and more universal than words.”¹

Andrew Hill says, “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.”²

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 Pat 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.³

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*

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

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

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

heavenly palace. Put simply: Yahveh is King and he commands divine servants to do his will.

How did Israel know about this heavenly council? Apparently through visionary visitations by human beings. These visits are called “throne visions”—firsthand reports of the heavenly council in session. Only a few of these 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 Judaism and later in 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 “council of God” is. It comes from Psalm 82:1:

Elohim has taken his place in the divine council
[עדת-אל *adat el*, or council of 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
[קהל-קדושים *qahal qadoshim*].
For who in the skies can be compared to Yahveh?
Who among the sons of God [בני-אלים *benei elim*, heavenly beings]
is like Yahveh,
A God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones [סוד-קדושים *sod qadoshim*],
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 [בני-האלהים *benei ha’elohim*]
came to present themselves before Yahveh,
and the Satan [השטן] also came among them.

And in Nehemiah 9:6 the exiles just back 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 [צבא השמים *tzeva hashamayim*] bows down before you.

Terms for the Gathering

Three frequent terms for the council gathering are עדה *edab*, קהל *qahal*, and סוד *sod*.

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 unique Son,” the *monogenes* (1:14), who resides on “the bosom of the Father” (v. 18).⁴ I believe this passage has Hebrew *sod*-imagery: Yeshua knows best the mind of God because he has unique place in the heavenly *sod*.

Daniel 7:10 refers to a heavenly “court.” The Aramaic noun דיןא, *dinab* signifies a “council of judges” (Koehler-Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 1065). God being depicted as a time-transcending Judge sitting among other judges is a striking image. But 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.⁵ The diversity suggests differing roles in their relationship to Yahveh in his diverse roles as King, Judge, Lord, and Warrior.

God's role as warrior is clearly revealed in his name “LORD of hosts”—צבאות יהוה *Yahveh Tzava'ot*—literally, Yahveh of armies.⁶ 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 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 border on the dangerous because they closely mirror ancient Near Eastern pantheons where the father deity is surrounded by his children deities.

⁴ In John 1:18, instead of *monogenes theos* (“unique, only or only begotten God”), I read *monogenes huios* (“only Son”), believing it is the original. 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 (1885) 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*, 418).

⁵ Holy ones (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.

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

Israel's Guarded Heritage

But the Israelites weren't embarrassed by this. They firmly held onto the council imagery throughout their history. It posed no threat to God'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 antediluvian 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. *angeloi*, angels). Though supremely powerful, they are not worshiped. Loyal Hebrews and later Israelites worshiped only Yahveh. But some apostates bowed to “the sun, moon and stars”—apparently rebellious *elohim* posing as heavenly bodies.

Thoroughly Hebrew

References to the heavenly council or the King's throneroom 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, 4QDeut; 33:2; 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).

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.”⁷

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 man has become like one of us” (Gen 3:22); “Come, let us go down” (Gen 11:7).⁸ 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.

⁷ Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (2d ed., Newton, Mass.: Branford, 1970), 328.

⁸ On these plural pronouns as allusions to the heavenly council, see [The Genesis Plurals](#). Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (1888), says these verses manifest a “communicative plural” (God conferring with his council). Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2001), says “God is addressing the angels or heavenly court.”

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 sweeping his hand around his council as he says,

“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” (בְּלֵא אֱלֹהִים, *belo elohim*, Jer 5:7) and “demons” (שְׂדֵימ, *shedim*, Deut 32:17) of Israel’s neighbors, who were in thrall to these imitation gods. But the concept wasn’t merely 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*. But in the Hebrew Bible those who worship the *elohim* around Yahveh are idolaters.

Throne Visions

As I said, awareness of the great assembly of *elohim* was gained 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), *ha-satan* and the *malakh* or angel of YHVH (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 (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 the *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,” a messenger of the Court (2 Sam 14:17, 20; 19:27). In later eras, a prophet could be called an “angel of Yahveh” (Haggai 1:13; Mal 2:7; cf. 3:1).

David’s testimony is that of a prophet, not merely a shepherd king. 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).

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” escort someone who looks human into the royal hall. They sweep in as “the clouds of heaven” and “present him” to the King and the assembly of *100 million* (lit. Aramaic). Commentators give this בר-אנש *bar enash*—son of mortal man—various identities. Some say he is the archangel Michael.⁹ 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. *Enash* connotes “mortal man,” as does Hebrew *enosh*.

Given the theological thrust of Daniel, I believe Bar Enash is a *son of David* who receives the kingdom as a co-ruler with God, as outlined in ancient Davidic

⁹ 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, esp. 176.

Theology.¹⁰ But—he is also *another Adam*, one given authority over all creation, as originally intended in Genesis.¹¹

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

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 identity of the number two in the hierarchy.¹²

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 warehouse of materials about what goes on in heaven during the worship services conducted by seven angelic-priests. The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (4Q400–407) are stunningly elaborate about this. And 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).¹³

In 11QMelch, Melchizedek is a heavenly priest who stands in for God as eschatological judge. As such, he is called “Elohim.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Some elements of [Davidic Theology](#) 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).

¹¹ On Adam–David compare Gen 1:26–28; Ps 8:4–6; 89:20, 26–27; 110:1.

¹² Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): (1–15) 2, 11.

¹³ From Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London/New York: Penguin, 1997), 185.

¹⁴ See [Melchizedek: Angel, Man, or Messiah? \(11QMelch/11Q13\)](#).

Just how the authors of these documents knew all these things is unclear. They don't tell anyone. They don't declare themselves as prophets nor 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."¹⁵

Council Imagery in New Testament

Psalm 110:1

Psalm 110 verse one 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."¹⁶

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

In **Acts 7**, just before becoming a martyr, Stephen says, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (v. 56).

¹⁵ At Ps 109:3 [MT 110:3] the LXX reads:

Among the splendors of the holy ones,	εν ταις λαμπροτησιν των αγιων
From the womb of the dawn,	εκ γαστρος προ εωσφορου
I have begotten you.	εξεγεννησα σε

The late David Flusser believed the reading "I have begotten you" was in the original Hebrew 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: **יְלִידְתְּךָ** *yaldutecha* (your youth); but several mss (so BHS, BHL) read: **יְלִידְתִּי** *yeliditicha* (I begot you). D. Flusser, "Melchizedek and the Son of Man," in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 192.

¹⁶ Ps 110:1 imagery is seen in places such as: Matt 22:43-44; 26:64; Acts 2:33, 36; 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).

This striking image obviously reflects 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 gathered around the throne, worshiping (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)

Like the visions in the Hebrew Bible, these sets of visions come at *crisis moments* when God or Messiah's lordship are 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 or spokesmen of the Council. And the visions *confirm that* the crucified and resurrected *Yeshua does in fact have a place* in heaven at the Throne.

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

Paul

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

Nearly every letter 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; cf. Ps 8:6; 1 Cor 15:27).

Paul depicts the Daniel 7 throne scene when he writes 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 echoes these 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 seem to be 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).

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 this were true of Job and the prophets, how much more 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).

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 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 rule the earth to the *Bar Enash*, the Son of Man. So Yeshua tells his disciples, “He [God] gave him [me] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:27). And 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 anathema 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.”¹⁷ 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 said the “Lord” next to God 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]

¹⁷ For example: m. Sanh. 4:5; cf. b. Sanh. 38a; b. Megillah 25a; Sifre on Deut. 379; 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 BUDED [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]

The most determined effort to divert attention away from Yeshua and the proof-texts that he and his followers used involved Daniel 7:13. Key rabbis denounced as blasphemy identifying *Bar Enash* as the *Son of David* (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. [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38b]

And to make the point stick, later rabbis 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. They also broke with all previous Jewish tradition by rejecting Daniel as a prophet.¹⁸

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](#).¹⁹ Then to bolster the content of these creeds, some zealous Christian scribes altered their Greek manuscripts in places to transform the original Heavenly Council imagery of God-and-Lord into more

¹⁸ Early, *pre-Talmudic* Judaism viewed Daniel as a prophet. Evidence includes: (1) in the LXX, Daniel is in the Prophets portion; (2) at 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).

¹⁹ The early Jewish believers known as 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.

orthodox trinitarian patterns.²⁰ (See the related article entitled: “[Worship in the New Testament](#).”)

Reopening Court Documents

Thus, catholic theologians joined rabbinic theologians in a common effort to abandon a central cosmological symbol of the 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. But that is changing.

■ [Paul Sumner](#)

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

www.hebrew-streams.org

²⁰ Some examples of scribal changes meant to reinforce trinitarian models include:

Matt 6:13: Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Change: 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 Cor 8:6: For us there is but one God, the Father . . . and one Lord, Yeshua Messiah

Change: one God . . . one Lord . . . **and one Holy Spirit**

Heb 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: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are one.

Change: **There are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one**. And there are three that testify on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

On these and similar attempted scribal interpolations see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed., and Bruce Metzger, ed., *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2d ed., Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994).