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In a 2007 article, biblical scholar Michael S. Heiser emphasized, “The divine council is central to a correct understanding of biblical theology, though few have recognized that fact. . . . The interaction on Israel’s divine council needs to continue.”\(^1\) It is significant that the motif of the divine council, or council in heaven, is found in each Latter-day Saint book of scripture: the Bible (Genesis 1:26–27; Psalm 82; Isaiah 6:1–9),\(^2\) the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:8–13),\(^3\) the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 76:58; 121:32; 132:20), and the Pearl of Great Price (Abraham 3:22–28; 4:1; 5:2). Shortly before his death, the Prophet Joseph Smith delivered a powerful sermon that, among other things, explained the divine council and its function.\(^4\) Missionaries discuss the premortal council with investigators and potential converts in one of the missionary lessons.\(^5\) These examples, which could be multiplied, demonstrate the importance of the divine council in LDS thought. The concept of the divine council is one of the foundational doctrinal points of the plan of salvation.

A careful reading of the first chapter in the Book of Moses yields even more evidence of the importance of the divine council
in scriptural narrative. This dramatic opening to the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis delivers a powerful example of how Moses became a member of the divine council in what is a common ancient Near Eastern motif. This remarkable narrative is compelling evidence for the authenticity of Joseph Smith’s revelation concerning Moses. It roots the narrative of the Book of Moses in the world of the ancient Near East. It should not come as a surprise, as Stephen D. Ricks aptly reminds us, that “Joseph Smith . . . was nothing if not also a restorer of ancient doctrines.”

THE DIVINE COUNCIL: AN OVERVIEW

Before we explore Moses’ ascension to the divine council in Moses 1, it is only appropriate to provide a brief overview of the concept of the divine council in ancient Israelite thought. Taylor Halverson, a teaching and learning consultant at Brigham Young University, provided a succinct and helpful definition of the divine council:

Ancient Israelites believed that God resided in heaven, surrounded by his heavenly council. 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. According to the Old Testament, God’s heavenly council consisted of beings such as the sons of God (see Psalm 89:7; Job 38:7), gods (see Psalms 58:1; 82:1; 97:7; 138:1), the stars (see Job 38:7), members of the council of God (see Job 15:8), members of the assembly of holy ones (see Psalm 89:5–6; Job 5:1), ministers (see Psalm 103:21), prophets (see Amos 3:7), and angels.

Several scholars have analyzed the divine council and its significance in Israelite religion. Stephen A. Geller indicates that
"older, especially poetic, texts portray the deity as seated among the assembly of divine beings, who are sometimes... called bene 'el(im), ('sons of gods'), kedoshim ('holy ones'), among other terms."^\textsuperscript{8}

Ronald Hendel similarly notes that "[Yahweh]... was not... the only god in Israelite religion. Like a king in his court, Yahweh was served by lesser deities, variously called 'the sons of God,' 'the host of heaven,' and similar titles."^\textsuperscript{9}

H. Haag explains that several Old Testament texts clearly describe "a pantheon [of gods] under the leadership of a supreme God."^\textsuperscript{10}

E. Theodore Mullen Jr., in his classic study on the divine council, explains:

El... was the king, father, and progenitor of the gods in Canaanite mythology. As such, he stood at the head of the pantheon, unaffected by the various conflicts among the younger, cosmogonic deities. When consulted, he delivered his decree. El must thus be pictured as the aged judge who, as we shall show, sat at the head of the assembly, surrounded by the other gods. Likewise, the pictures of Yahweh in his council present him as the head of the assembly, the god whose decree determined the decision and actions of his messengers and holy ones.^\textsuperscript{11}

So prevalent is the evidence for this polytheistic depiction of God sitting in a council of other gods that some scholars are now coming to question the propriety of using the term monotheism to describe the religion of preexilic Israel.^\textsuperscript{12}

Besides these divine personages being identified variously as "gods," "sons of God(s)," "holy ones," and "angels," the divine council in ancient Israel was also composed of earthly prophets who were commissioned to carry out the will of the council.^\textsuperscript{13}

Multiple examples in the Bible demonstrate this phenomenon. Prophets such as Micaiah (1 Kings 22), Isaiah (Isaiah 6),^\textsuperscript{14} Zechariah (Zechariah 1), and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1–2), among others, all experienced similar theophanies that introduced them into the divine council. In a passage from the Bible well known to Latter-day
Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7). David Bokovoy informs us that the context of this verse is that of a prophet being introduced into the divine council. “Though translated as ‘secret’ in the King James Version of the Bible,” writes Bokovoy, “the noun sôd, in this instance, refers to God’s divine council.” Bokovoy continues by clarifying that “by participating in the council, prophets become mal’ākim or ‘angels.’ Literally a mal’āk was one who was sent—that is, a messenger. . . . Therefore, in becoming members of God’s council who see and hear as they stand in the assembly, Old Testament prophets were sent as messengers and mediators for the council (see Jeremiah 23:18).” This assertion has direct relevance in how we view the ascension of Moses in the opening chapter of the Book of Moses.

In an illuminating and important commentary on the Book of Moses, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw provides convincing evidence that connects the Book of Moses with ancient temple symbolism and the ascension motif. As Bradshaw observes at the beginning of his commentary on Moses 1: “The details of Moses’ experience in chapter 1 place it squarely in the tradition of ancient ‘heavenly ascent’ literature and its relationship to temple theology, rites, and ordinances. Although the stories of such ascents are similar in many respects to temple initiation rites, they make the claim of being something more. While ancient temple rituals dramatically depict a figurative journey into the presence of God, the ascent literature portrays prophets who experience actual encounters with Deity within the heavenly temple.”

Turning to the text of Moses 1 itself, we open with Moses being “caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” (Moses 1:1). Immediately we have a description that characterizes this
as a temple-ascension text. The tops of mountains were symbolically linked with the temple in the ancient Near East. Not only that, but the divine assembly of God is also depicted in the Hebrew Bible as being on the top of a mountain. Take, for instance, Isaiah 14:12-14, where the “Shining One, son of Dawn” is thrown down to Sheol for pompously assuming that he would “sit in the mount of assembly [another name for the heavenly assembly of the gods], On the summit of Zaphon” (Isaiah 14:13, Jewish Publication Society Tanakh). Commentary by Benjamin D. Sommer in a footnote provided in the Jewish Study Bible (Isaiah 14:12-15) helpfully clarifies that “Isaiah refers ironically to the king [of Babylon] as Shining One, son of Dawn, applying to him the name of a character from ancient Canaanite myth. (The Shining One is not known from Canaanite texts, but his father, Dawn, is described in Canaanite myth as a son of the high god El.) . . . This character seems to have attempted to join the head of the pantheon, whether this was El (who was known in Canaanite texts as Most High) or Baal (whose palace was located on the summit of Mount Zaphon).”

Another text from the Hebrew Bible that associates the top of a mountain with the abode of the heavenly assembly is Psalm 48:3. Here the Psalmist sings of the Lord’s “holy mountain—fair-crested, joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, summit of Zaphon, city of the great king” (JPS Tanakh). Marc Zvi Brettler (Psalm 48:3f, JPS Tanakh) draws attention to the fact that the summit or mount of Zaphon is, according to Canaanite belief, the residence of Baal and another name of the divine abode of the members of the heavenly court.

Returning to the text of Moses 1, we read that while on the top of the mountain, Moses beholds the face of God while the glory of God falls upon him, so as to ensure that he could “endure [God’s] presence” (Moses 1:2). After introducing himself and showing Moses his majestic creations in a panoramic vision, God informs
Moses that he has “a work for [him]” to do (Moses 1:6). As is similar with the call narratives of other Old Testament prophets, Moses is depicted as being commissioned to carry forth the will of the head of the council through a direct communication with God.

**Moses as a Son of God**

Most important to our present study is Moses 1:4, where God calls Moses “my son.” This phrase is repeated in verse 6, where Moses is also said to be “in the similitude of mine Only Begotten.” Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines *similitude* as “likeness; resemblance; likeness in nature, qualities or appearance; as *similitude* of substance.”

Moses being identified as a son of God is very significant. It directly involves Moses with the divine council. As noted previously by Halverson, one of the unique titles given to individual members of the divine council included “son of God.” According to Gene M. Tucker, the title “son of [fill in the blank]” in a Semitic context either can refer to the literal offspring of an individual (including God’s literal progeny of divine beings in his heavenly council) or can act as a generic title for someone belonging to a particular caste, guild, tribe, group, or class. This generic form explains references in the Hebrew Bible to the “sons of Israel,” “sons of Zion,” “sons of the east,” “descendants of Aaron,” “sons of the perfumers,” “sons of prophets,” and “son of virtue.” In each instance the term “son[s] of [fill in the blank]” serves to designate members of the specific group or class. With regard to the phrase “son[s] of God,” W. R. F. Browning concludes that such, in a Semitic sense, is an appropriate appellation for Israelite kings as well as faithful Jews. Since the Israelites were commanded to be holy even as God was holy (see Leviticus 11:44), it is understandable that, ideally, righteous Israelites could identify with God and
his angelic host with the same quality of holiness and thus take upon themselves the same divine title of “son(s) of God.”

Dan Belnap, in an intriguing article exploring Moses 1, insightfully explains that God’s declaration of Moses as his son “emphasizes the familial relationship between Moses and God” and “speaks not only of [Moses’] divine heritage but also of his potential to be like God through exaltation.” This declaration, according to Belnap, “highlights [Moses’] covenantal relationship with God.” This relationship falls directly in line with an ancient Near Eastern conception of sonship. As Belnap further clarifies, “The terms [father and son] are used throughout the ancient Near East to refer to political and social relationships. In ancient Israel they are used to describe the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.”

Most strikingly, scholars have catalogued ancient Jewish and later Christian religious traditions that explicitly speak of Moses’ deification into God’s angelic council, usually in association with Moses’ ascent on Mount Sinai. Jarl Fossum, for instance, has observed that “in Samaritanism, Moses is ‘the Son of the house of God,’ a title which characterizes him as belonging to the angelic dynasty. Being the ‘Elohim from humankind’ . . . Moses is actually the highest among the angelic sons of God.” Furthermore, according to Fossum, “R. Jose ben Halaffa (2d century) says that since God calls Moses ‘faithful in all His house’ (cf. Num 12:7), ‘he ranks higher than the ministering angels.’”

John Lierman has detailed a depiction of “the elevation of Moses to a divine kingship or to divine standing” in one of the texts found in the Qumran corpus, while Crispian H. T. Fletcher-Louis has amassed a plethora of ancient sources, including the Qumran text 4Q374, Philo, Josephus, and numerous pseudepigrapha, all ascribing a divine status to Moses among the angelic council of God. After a careful review of the available evidence, Fletcher-Louis concludes that this “fundamentally Jewish tradition” is “rooted in the Biblical text (e.g. Exod. 7:1).”
With these examples in mind, we can plausibly conclude that Moses’ classification as a son of God is meant to ratify his membership in the divine council. This understanding also helps clarify Satan’s motive in calling Moses a “son of man” after Moses descended from the mountain to begin his commission. The text informs us that upon his descent from the mount, “behold, Satan came tempting him, saying: Moses, son of man, worship me” (Moses 1:12). Moses rebuffs Satan by challenging him, “Who art thou?” and insisting that he (Moses) is “a son of God, in the similitude of [God’s] Only Begotten” (Moses 1:13).

When viewed within the context of the divine council, this dialogue between Satan and Moses takes upon itself a new meaning. Satan’s tactic was to bring Moses down to a level of mere humanity by calling him a “son of man.” Sure enough, Moses was a “son of man” in the sense that he was a mortal. The term “son of man” in Hebrew (ben ‘aḏām) simply denotes “mortal” or “human being.” Although the King James translators followed a literal reading of the Hebrew, many contemporary English translations (including the New Revised Standard Version and the JPS Tanakh) of the Hebrew Bible routinely translate ben ‘aḏām as “mortal.” However, since Moses was designated a “son of God” by God himself, he was much more than merely a “son of man.” His deification into the divine council put him far above the status of a groveling human. Satan wished to strip Moses of his prophetic legitimacy by denying his association in the divine council as a “son of God.” As Rodney Turner explains, Moses’ divine calling as a spokesman for God was “challenged when Moses was accosted by Satan himself: ‘Moses, son of man, worship me.’ (Moses 1:12). This is the ruse the devil has employed since time immemorial. He has ever sought to strip the Lord’s people of their peculiar standing with him and drag them down to the level of unregenerate humanity. . . . Moses would not be robbed.”
Furthermore, the description of Moses as being in the "similitude" of the premortal Christ hearkens to Genesis 1:26–27, wherein mankind is said to be made in the image and likeness of God. The careful reader will not fail to notice that the first person plural pronoun "us" and the plural possessive adjective "our" is used in the text. Scholars have noted that such is evidence for the presence of the divine council in these verses. Thus, Moses' identification in Moses 1:6 as being in the similitude, or the likeness and image, of God and his Only Begotten Son parallels the decree of the head of the council given in Genesis 1:26–27. This is yet another instance of Moses being associated with the divine council in the text of Moses 1.

Upon his victory over Satan, Moses is once again brought up into the presence of God and given the charge to "write the things which I shall speak" (Moses 1:40). The concluding admonition given to Moses in chapter 1 is to "show them [the words of the Lord given to Moses upon the mount] not unto any except them that believe" (Moses 1:42). Moses is therefore commanded to be circumspect in fulfilling his commission.

CONCLUSION

Moses' gripping experience in the opening chapter of the Book of Moses is best understood as a Near Eastern temple-ascension narrative wherein a prophet (1) ascends into the presence of God and his royal assembly residing in the heavenly temple on the cosmic mountain, (2) receives a divine, angelic rank as a member of the council, and (3) receives a mandate or commission and is sent back down to earth to become a messenger for the council. Moses 1 gives us several indicators (including the setting on the top of a mountain, Moses being brought into the presence of God, and Moses being identified as a "son of God") that Moses was introduced into the divine council and was given the awesome
responsibility of being a messenger of God. Furthermore, Moses’ ascension and deification into the heavenly council fits nicely within an ancient Near Eastern setting. Moses 1 unmistakably contains many of the hallmarks present in similar ascension narratives. The Prophet Joseph Smith was not exaggerating when he called the Book of Moses a “precious morsel.”

NOTES


4. “The head God called together the Gods and sat in grand council
to bring forth the world. The grand councilors sat at the head in yonder heavens and contemplated the creation of the worlds which were created at the time. . . . In the beginning, the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and people it.” History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 6:307–8. For a fantastic analysis of Joseph Smith’s teachings on the divine council, see Kevin L. Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith’s Understanding of Genesis 1:1,” BYU Studies 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24.


17. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Book of Moses*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2010). For a condensed version of this voluminous...


20. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 25, is emphatic that the “assembly of the gods did indeed meet on a mountain.”


analysis of sonship in the ancient Near East.


28. Belnap, “Where Is Thy Glory?” 164. Belnap concludes, “By affirming that Moses is his son, God acknowledges Moses’s faithfulness and status as an heir, worthy to be in his presence.”

29. For an overview of this intriguing theme, see John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009), 25-34.

30. Jarl Fossum, “Son of God,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:130; internal citations removed. Also pertinent is Fossum's identification of other prophetic figures, most prominently Enoch in the pseudepigraphal text 3 Enoch, who are also exalted into the divine council and granted divine secrets as Moses is in Moses 1 (“Son of God,” 130–31).


that “the heavenly court is mentioned in connection with the first human(s) (Gen. 1.26; 3.22; Job 15.7–8).” Jon D. Levenson, Genesis 1:26–28, *Jewish Study Bible*, 14, similarly notes that “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.” Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” 22, also emphasizes that Genesis 1:26–27 “represent[s] a conception of [a] plurality of divine beings.” Along with these authorities John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 95, agrees that the divine council provides “a contextual understanding of the plurals in the early chapters of Genesis (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7).” From a Latter-day Saint point of view, Elder James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 18–19, also linked the presence of the divine council with the creation of man.