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Topic: ANE Comparative Exploration

This paper is a Comparative Exploration of Yahweh's Council with the divine assembly of the Mesopotamian gods. In the Ancient Near East there were many cultures that had their own gods. All the cultures around Israel were polytheistic.¹ The gods were real to the ancients, and their stories gave account of the gods and the world in ways that were important for understanding the world and life in general.² Walton asserted that for the Israelites, the stories in the Old Testament served a similar function. Yahweh was real to them, and his deeds were important. Like everyone else in the ancient world, the Israelites believed that everything that happened and everything that existed found its cause in deity. In this way of thinking, it is irrelevant whether the modern reader believes the gods of the Babylonians, or the God of Israel exist. The significance and nature of the literature are not dependent on our assessment of their reality. These accounts serve as important sources for coming to understand the worldview of the ancients.³

In Genesis 18, scripture points out that “the LORD (Yahweh) appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He offered hospitality to them, feed them and one of them said “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah

¹Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 53

² Ibid., 34

³Ibid., 34

your wife will have a son.⁴ This suggests that God knew that Abraham was childless. The scripture continues that when the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the Lord said “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”⁵ In this text, one out of the three spoke and made their intentions known. In the Ancient Near Eastern world, major decisions among the gods were made in the community of the gods.⁶ Walton asserted that this is most likely a perception modeled after human government of an early period, where the gods deliberate and govern as an assembly.⁷ He pointed out that this divine council is evidenced in many of the Ugaritic texts as well as in a wide variety of texts from Mesopotamia.⁸

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is the sole authority responsible for carrying out the functions associated with deity. In the Genesis 18 text, it was Yahweh who promised Abraham a son and it was Him who spoke that “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Although there were others with Him, Yahweh is the one who speaks. Walton mentions that unlike the Mesopotamian council made up of the great gods, the Israelite council, similar to that of Ugarit, is made up of lesser beings.⁹ In the Genesis 18 text, we are told that the LORD said “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” The scripture continued that the men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained

⁴ *Life Application Bible Study Bible* NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 32

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33

⁶ Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 54

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56

standing before the LORD.¹⁰ In Chapter 19, Scripture points out that the two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and they carried out the task of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah.¹¹ In this case, we see that the lesser beings carried out the task of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. Walton, indicated that the council under Yahweh's command, addresses the same kinds of deliberating and governing tasks. He revealed that these concerns of the assembly are like that of the divine assembly in Mesopotamian religion: upholding the moral and legal order of society, deciding about victory and defeat in war and politics, electing and deposing kings, controlling, and shaping history.¹²

Genesis 11:1- 9 gives an account of the "tower of Babel" and how the people came together to build a tower that reaches to the heavens so they could make a name for themselves. However, the LORD (Yahweh) came down to see the city and the tower the people were building, and the LORD said "If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."¹³ This suggests that Yahweh was acting in council with others with Him.

Walton disclosed that material from the ancient Near East has provided much more information concerning how the council was believed to operate in the ancient world and based on that evidence we can understand the Israelite worldview more clearly. In addition, it is possible to make sense of some passages that had previously been opaque. Without an informed

¹⁰ *Life Application Bible Study Bible* NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 34

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34-36

¹² Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 56

¹³ *Life Application Bible Study Bible* NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 22

understanding of the divine council, it had become commonplace for interpreters to read the Trinity, or at least plurality in the godhead.¹⁴ This information about life and thinking of the Ancient Near East helps us to understand the Old Testament stories better.

Again, Walton observed that even as we have come to understand the Old Testament better in light of the ancient worldview, we are able to see sharp contrast in the way that the concept of the council has evolved to suit the theology of Israel.... Nevertheless, the thinking about it is adjusted in the Bible so that it is in line with revelation about the nature of God.¹⁵

One other thing important to note is that in the Ancient Near East, the gods would not be jealous of attention paid to other gods as long as their own needs were being met and their position was not in jeopardy.¹⁶ However, this is not the case of Yahweh. Yahweh, the God of Israel is different because He will not tolerate the idea of false gods and unacceptable beliefs.¹⁷ God clearly declared in Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me”.¹⁸ In Exodus 20:23, God or Yahweh reaffirmed that “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.”¹⁹ Yahweh demanded total devotion to Him alone. He declared His Sovereignty that He is the LORD over everyone and everything. Therefore, Israel should not have no other God beside Him. Yahweh demonstrated that He was certainly different from the gods of the ANE.

¹⁴ Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 56

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 72

¹⁸ *Life Application Bible Study Bible NIV* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 124

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126

In conclusion, the God of the Israelites was seen sometimes as acting in council with others who were lesser than Him, He made all the major decisions and promises, and He fulfilled them.

Reference

1. *Life Application Bible Study Bible* NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011)
2. Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018)