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**OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY**

**WHY “MONOTHEISTIC” MAY NOT BE  
THE BEST DESCRIPTION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**CARL GOODSON HONORS PROGRAM**

**BY: JACOB THOMAS**

**20 APRIL 2022**

## Introduction

Christianity is often considered one of the three great monotheistic religions. However, the tendency today is to accept this without considering alternatives that may be more accurate to the text. In terms of the Old Testament (OT), there have been attempts to use some of the most ancient passages to argue for monotheism. Before evaluating this approach, it is important to define the terms that will be integral for the following discussion.

Monotheism (as commonly used today) means the belief in the existence of only one God. As a result, this view directly excludes the possibility for other gods to be present in creation.<sup>1</sup> As already mentioned, this is the predominant category embraced by Christianity (including the OT and New Testament [NT]). The alternative often, fittingly, framed in direct opposition to monotheism is polytheism. This category pertains to religions that both acknowledge the existence of multiple gods, as well as advocate for the worship of all of these beings.<sup>2</sup> Monotheism and polytheism are the two extremes in the scale of attempts to classify theistic religions. There are two others, less commonly understood, that must be mentioned: henotheism and monolatry.

Henotheism is the worship of one god among many other gods. The most common reason that this one god is held in comparatively higher regard than others is a matter of cultural or tribal preference. This does not lower the other gods under the god worshipped. Henotheism as a view is mainly focused on the people worshipping and their choice to worship a particular god, rather than the god possessing sovereignty over the rest of their pantheon.<sup>3</sup> Monolatry, in

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore M. Ludwig, "Monotheism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 10:68-69.

<sup>2</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Polytheism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 11:435-36.

<sup>3</sup> Michiko Yusa, "Henotheism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 6:266.

contrast, is the worship of one God alone, without the exclusion of the existence of other gods. This one God is explicitly the only one to be worshipped.<sup>4</sup> The primary difference between henotheism and monolatry is that in the former there is still reverence for all of the gods, while one is elevated above the others. In monolatry, there is no such reverence for the lesser gods.

Because monotheism is often assumed by the vast majority of current biblical readers to be the accurate view among the four, it is important to explore the biblical evidence to decide whether this is actually supported by the text. In order to address this, the portions of the OT that are often claimed as the strongest evidence for monotheism, namely the books of Deuteronomy and Isaiah, will be most likely to reveal whether or not this view holds true, or if one of the other three is more in line with the original meaning.

### **Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy, as one of the five books of the Pentateuch (the books that provide the theological foundation for rest of the Old Testament), is essential in the pursuit of discovering the belief system of the Old Testament authors. The book was not only critical to the Israelite faith as an extended teaching from one of their most influential prophets, Moses; it also communicates their view of the spiritual realm. The most significant sections concerning this topic are found in chapters 4 and 32.

#### Chapter 4 –

In Deuteronomy 4:19, the Israelites are cautioned not to bow down to the “host of heaven” (English Standard Version [ESV]).<sup>5</sup> At first glance, this may seem like a simple reference to the modern-day understanding of “the sun and the moon and the stars,” which are

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<sup>4</sup> John Mbiti, “Monolatry,” In *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1999-2003), 3:637.

<sup>5</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

listed immediately before. The background of the ancient Near East must be taken into consideration to find what this passage meant to the original readers, however. These celestial bodies “were thought of as divine and worthy of praise . . . in all the Near Eastern religions,” especially the sun, which “was itself so awe-inspiring as to induce worship in its own right.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the surrounding cultures would have had a very different view when they thought of and looked at the sun, moon, and stars. Being present within this context, an ancient Israelite who was being warned not to worship the heavenly hosts would have had this framework in mind. To worship one of these would be to worship a god other than Yahweh.

Craigie goes on to argue that this does not mean the Israelites believed in these bodies as gods, but rather that “the warning is against a more subtle danger, that of taking something within the created universe and making it divine . . . .”<sup>7</sup> Block claims the sun, moon, and stars to be merely “objects.”<sup>8</sup> However, later in Deuteronomy 17:2-3, these same bodies are equated to “other gods”<sup>9</sup>:

- 17:2 *If a man or woman among you in one of your towns that the LORD your God will give you is discovered doing evil in the sight of the LORD your God and violating his covenant*  
3 *and has gone to serve other gods by bowing in worship to the sun, moon, or all the stars in the sky—which I have forbidden (CSB)*

This reveals that the Israelites did in fact see a connection between the celestial bodies and an equally numerous host of divine beings, or gods. Some translations, such as the ESV, do not connect the “other gods” with the preceding “sun or the moon or any of the hosts of heaven”:

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<sup>6</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 137.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 130.

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?: Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008):22.

3 *and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden,*

The issue here is the insertion of the word “or” when no equivalent is found in the Hebrew. In fact, the original text reads “and to the sun,” thus including the sun, the moon, and other heavenly spheres among the gods. Because of this, the translation found in the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) is more aligned to the true meaning, while those that choose to use “or” before the list of the celestial bodies are mistaken. Thus, the Near Eastern background and Deuteronomy 17 suggest that the worship of the sun, moon, and stars (or hosts of heaven) was understood by the biblical author and his audience as a direct worship of gods. The purpose of this verse is to instruct Israel to avoid worship of the heavenly host, unlike their neighbors, not to make an argument for Yahweh being the only *elohim* (god) who exists.

Deuteronomy 29:25-26<sup>10</sup> give further insight into the worldview behind 4:19:

29:25 *Then people will answer, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he had made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

26 *They began to serve other gods, bowing in worship to gods they had not known—gods that the Lord had not permitted them to worship. (CSB)*

The people speaking in v. 25 are the other nations, giving their perspective of Israel’s eventual fall after they reject Yahweh and turn to other gods. The main matter of interest here, however, is that there is a discrepancy between the translation “permitted” in 29:26 and “allotted” in 4:19, even though the same Hebrew word is used in both cases: *halaq*. The difference in translation confuses the meaning of 29:26 and obscures the parallel between the two passages in English, leading to confusion in 4:19 as well. As seen above, the translators of the CSB choose to use “permitted” instead of 4:19’s “allotted.” This interpretation sees *halaq* as referring to an instance of God refusing to permit Israel to worship other gods. The emphasis is placed on the absolute

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<sup>10</sup> In the Hebrew Masoretic Text, these verses are numbered 24 and 25.

restriction of Israel's worship being given to any other gods. They were to worship only God. However, in the Hebrew text, the word translated "worship" does not appear in the latter half of v. 26. There seems no reason not to translate *halaq* the same way as it was found in 4:19. The ESV, in this case, has it correct here, translating the passage as "gods whom they had not known and who he [the LORD] had not allotted to them." The question arises then: what does it mean for Yahweh to allot gods to the people? The verse reveals that Yahweh had not allotted other gods to his people, and that he had to the other nations. The focus is not just on Yahweh's people being forbidden to worship other gods; it is also on the uniqueness of Israel not being allotted gods like their neighbors. The temptation remains for them to worship the other gods, as they saw the surrounding peoples doing so. But Yahweh has called them out and allotted himself instead of other gods to Israel. This process of Yahweh allotting gods over the nations, and the implications thereof, will be discussed further below; but the fact that he chose to allot gods in the first place supports Heiser's point that "the writer of Deuteronomy did not consider the host of heaven (sun, moon, starry host) whom Yahweh allotted to the Gentile nations only as humanly fabricated idols."<sup>11</sup> McConville agrees with Heiser, even revealing that "the idea that other nations were thought to have their particular deities . . . can be found elsewhere in the OT and other Jewish literature."<sup>12</sup> These bodies were seen as gods that were allotted by Yahweh and then worshipped detrimentally by other peoples, not just as the created celestial bodies as the modern view holds.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Heiser, 25.

<sup>12</sup> J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 108.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of Yahweh allotting gods to other nations raises a question: is God responsible for the nations following the other gods? If one is to use this question to argue against the presence of divine beings in Deuteronomy, or even as a further discussion point, they must also consider that this is not an isolated instance but is consistent with passages in the NT as well. Romans 1:18-25 and 2 Thessalonians 2:11 present an image of what the Apostle Paul communicates as God delivering people to their own desires. This NT equivalent of the question must

Continuing in Deuteronomy 4, vv. 35 and 39 have also been used to argue for Israel's monotheism. McConville agrees with this in his commentary, claiming the verse "says categorically that there are no other gods."<sup>14</sup> However, as seen above, the preceding verses do not match this, as the celestial bodies and God's allotting of gods over the nations does not allow for it. Two other verses, Exodus 15:11 and Deuteronomy 10:17, will help in understanding the true meaning of vv. 35 and 39.<sup>15</sup>

Exodus 15:11 is included in the song of Moses and Israel after they were rescued from Egypt at the Red Sea. In it, they ask the question, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?" This verse presents a very interesting question: who are the gods that the Israelites are asking this rhetorical question about? It has been argued that this sustains the monotheistic view, as clearly if other gods did not exist, then there is none other like Yahweh. If God is the only god in existence, however, then this contrast loses its strength. Instead, the glorification of God above the gods would be invalid at best and comparing him to the nonexistence of "the imaginary beings that really aren't there" at worst.<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 10:17, in a similar fashion, glorifies God by lifting him above the other gods with the title "God of gods." Again, if other gods were not believed to have existed, this would not be a valid praise like Moses clearly intended. It would be a similar title to "King of kings" without other kings or "Lord of lords" (also in the same verse) without other lords. Moses was lifting Yahweh above the other gods that the Israelites would have been familiar with. In both verses, God is being compared to other gods that the ancient Israelites believed to exist, but both verses also show that God was above all of the other gods.

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be included in the discussion before jumping to the conclusion that God would be responsible for the peoples' worship of other gods just because he allotted the gods over them.

<sup>14</sup> McConville, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Heiser, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



This is the true meaning of the passages. The title “God of gods” places Yahweh as the “best in class,” further demonstrating how much higher he is. It seems that other gods exist in the framework of the Israelites’ worldview and are placed in complete subordination to Yahweh.

Viewing this, the interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:35 and 39 that is most convincing is that God is being exalted as “best in class” or the one God above all other gods. Yahweh allots other gods over the nations and calls Israel to himself alone, as seen in 4:19, where he also shows his authority through rebuking Israel’s eventual worship of other gods other than himself. Yahweh is also worthy of the praise found in Exodus 15, where he is exalted above the other gods, with them being incomparable to him. These passages, in their support of the existence of other gods, allow for the title given to Yahweh as “God of gods” to stand and retain its full glorification purpose.

#### Chapter 32 –

Verses 8 and 9 speak of when God “divided mankind . . . according to the sons of God.” Before addressing who these “sons of God” are, there is an important matter of determining what the original reading of the text was. This statement is translated as either referring to “sons of God” or “sons of Israel” (CSB). The two primary ancient traditions involved are the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), specifically manuscript 4QDeut, and the Masoretic Text (MT).<sup>17</sup> The latter has been used for centuries in translation, which has led to translators of some modern versions still preferring to use this manuscript over the much older Dead Sea Scroll portion.

The DSS date back from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D., long before the fifth century A.D. when the Masoretes copied down their texts. Experts in textual criticism believe that in some cases the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve original readings at places where the

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, et al., eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 345.

MT does not. The phrase “sons of God” from 4QDeut should be preferred as the original reading for three major reasons. First, the manuscript is from an earlier time, so this means it may be closer to what was originally written by the author. Second, the Septuagint (LXX), produced in the third century B.C., agrees with the DSS. As this Greek translation is dated centuries before the Masoretes, it is more likely to reflect the original wording of earlier manuscripts than what is present in the MT. Last, the phrase “sons of God” was most likely changed to “sons of Israel” to fit a popular interpretation at the time, and not the other way around. This makes sense purely because having “sons of God” was (and still is) more challenging to an audience who does not believe in multiple gods like the original author clearly did. It is probable that this change in the text from which the MT was copied occurred during a period of textual “standardization” around A.D. 100.<sup>18</sup> Some sections that mentioned spiritual beings other than Yahweh may have been altered to avoid the implication of polytheism. This may not have been a complete affront against other gods existing, however. As McConville describes it, “the change may not have been mere defensiveness against polytheism . . . [but] rather reflect an idea that entered Jewish interpretation, that the seventy descendants of Jacob,” that entered Egypt in Genesis 46, “matched the seventy nations catalogued in Genesis 10.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the Jewish thinkers of the time connected the seventy descendants of Jacob, or the “sons of Israel,” to have matched in number the nations listed in Genesis 10. This then led to further interpretations of passages, including Deuteronomy 32:8, being influenced by this belief. Just as there is a risk of popular ideas leading to biases when interpreting Scripture today, this Jewish interpretation seems very likely to have led to some manuscripts being altered to “sons of Israel” from the original “sons of God.” The intentions may not have been hostile, but in the pursuit of finding the meaning to the

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<sup>18</sup> Heiser, 9.

<sup>19</sup> McConville, 454.

original audience, it is essential to use the older, more accurate text of 4QDeut. Therefore, “sons of God” will be considered the more accurate choice in this instance.

The question then follows: who are these sons of God among whom Yahweh is dividing the nations according to their number? There have been many attempts to write these beings off as solely “idols or astronomical bodies,”<sup>20</sup> similar to the arguments discussed above with Deuteronomy 4:19. This is no coincidence. Heiser calls 4:19-20 an “explicit parallel” of 32:8-9, revealing that the meaning of the former should influence how the interpretation of the latter is understood. As already established, 4:19 supports the claim that Israel believed in other gods, not that these bodies were only physical bodies as the modern view perceives them to be. Since this is true in 4:19, it need not be otherwise in 32:8-9. Instead, these “sons of God” should be associated with the “gods” spoken of in vv. 12 and 17 of the same chapter:

32:12     *The Lord alone led him,  
            with no help from a foreign god...*  
17         *They sacrificed to demons, not God,  
            to gods they had not known,  
            new gods that had just arrived,  
            which your ancestors did not fear. (CSB)*

These verses not only prove that the author believed that other gods existed; they show that, in the same way that the Israelites were warned against revering the other gods, the worship of other gods (in this case also called “demons”) is strictly prohibited by Yahweh. Especially in v. 17, it is difficult to deny the existence of these gods, because to do so would be to deny the existence of demons, which the gods are associated with. These demons are the gods in direct opposition to Yahweh, those who were interested in “usurping Yahweh’s rights” to all worship and authority.<sup>21</sup> The people of Israel did not know these beings but turned aside to them just like

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<sup>20</sup> Heiser, 8.

<sup>21</sup> McConville, 455.

the other nations. The allotment of the other gods which Yahweh had instituted by dividing mankind “according to the sons of God” turned into a corrupt system of humanity, and even Israel, following these beings instead of the one in true authority. Of course, this all fits with the worldview that these gods existed, as without gods to divide humankind among, the allotting of gods could not have taken place. As stated above, if one wishes to deny the existence of gods in the earlier half of Deuteronomy 32, one only needs to adopt later, less accurate manuscripts, but also deny the very existence of demons.

Verse 39 then proves challenging, on the surface, as it includes a denial phrase commonly used to argue for monotheism in chapter 32. Two main translations have become popular, with both examples found in the CSB and ESV:

39     *See now that I alone am he;  
          there is no God but me.  
          I bring death and I give life;  
          I wound and I heal.  
          No one can rescue anyone from my power. (CSB)*

39     *See now that I, even I, am he,  
          and there is no god beside me;  
          I kill and I make alive;  
          I wound and I heal;  
          and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. (ESV)*

Verse 43 will aid in revealing the true meaning of the denial phrase in v. 39 and thus the more accurate translation:

43     *“Rejoice with him, O heavens;  
          bow down to him, all gods,  
          for he avenges the blood of his children  
          and takes vengeance on his adversaries.  
          He repays those who hate him  
          and cleanses his people’s land.”*

Similar to how particular words in vv. 8-9 were changed in the MT, v. 43 meets the same fate, with the MT changing the word *shamayim* (heavens; heavenly beings) to *goyim* (nations).<sup>22</sup> This change leads to an altered interpretation, in which the author is speaking to the nations, calling them to rejoice. However, 4QDeut reveals that the author is instead calling the spiritual beings, the demons of v. 17, to rejoice and even bow down to Yahweh. In the same way that the LXX agreed with the DSS in vv.8-9, it also agrees here. This sets the meaning to be an uplifting of Yahweh above the other gods, not evidence for the nonexistence of the gods. Seeing this, vv. 8-9, 17, and 43 all point towards the monotheistic view of Deuteronomy 32 as inaccurate.

Along with this, the word translated “but” in the CSB and “beside” in the ESV must be studied to know which is more accurate to the Hebrew manuscript. This word *immad*, when translated correctly, means to “stand in position” or “remain standing before.” The picture given by this is of one having the ability to stand before another. While neither of the translations choose to use language associated with standing, the ESV, in its use of “beside,” captures a more accurate picture of that which Yahweh is denying the other gods are capable of. The ESV is the more faithful translation of the Hebrew text, revealing the meaning as God denying that other gods are beside him in their standing. This does not argue for monotheism, but instead elevates Yahweh above all of the other gods. In the same way that Deuteronomy 10:17 would be empty praise if no other gods existed, this verse would not be able to uplift Yahweh if he was comparing himself to nonexistent beings in stature. Thus, the more coherent view is that the gods exist, but are unable to stand beside Yahweh in any way.

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<sup>22</sup> Heiser, 9.

## Psalm 82

Psalm 82's mentioning of gods other than Yahweh has been translated into English in a much clearer fashion than most other examples covered above and below. From the first verse, it is proclaimed that "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment" (Ps. 82:1). This seems to leave little room for questioning the author's worldview concerning the existence of other gods. However, there are arguments that attempt to explain away the other *elohim* to more neatly fit the modern worldview rather than facing the actual intention of the passage. These must be addressed to avoid falling into misinterpretation of the text.

First, there are attempts to claim a trinitarian view, just as with other passages, such as Genesis 1:26, to force the monotheistic view. However, this quickly falls apart. As with the Genesis example, a main issue with claiming the trinitarian view in Old Testament passages is that the original author had no framework such as that which is available to the church today. As with the Deuteronomy passages above, when interpreting Psalm 82, what the verses meant to their original audience is of utmost importance. Because the Trinity was not revealed until hundreds of years after this Psalm was written, there is no valid argument for it as the meaning intended.

There are also examples of word structure that go against the trinitarian view. To start, the first use of *elohim* is proven to be singular based on the form of the verb of which it is the subject, *nitzav*, which is also singular. This communicates to the reader that the god being spoken of is Yahweh. Yahweh is also shown to have "taken his place in the divine council," in particular one in which "he holds judgement." All evidence places Yahweh as the first *elohim* in the verse. The second use of *elohim* is clearly plural due to the preposition, *b-kerev*. Although *b-kerev* is

singular, it denotes that Yahweh is standing “in the midst” of the other *elohim*. The plural is implied here by the logic that “God cannot be said to be standing *in the midst* of a (singular) god or Himself.”<sup>23</sup>

Having a plural after the singular could lead some to see the Trinity here to easily fit the modern view. However, as Yahweh speaks to the council, this breaks down immediately when looking further into vv. 6 and 7, where the gods are later condemned:

82:6 *I said, “You are gods,  
sons of the Most High, all of you;  
7 nevertheless, like men you shall die,  
and fall like any prince.*

This is the final nail in the coffin for this view, as these verses “place the gods on equal footing with the humans. They have lost their immortality, hence their god status.”<sup>24</sup> There are no grounds for Yahweh sentencing himself to the level of humans, nor for him speaking lower of a different member of the Trinity. Yahweh is instead the sole “king [who] alone can control all of the other gods.”<sup>25</sup> He possesses the power not only to lead the discussion in the divine council, but also to judge the other gods for the wrongs they have committed. Tucker and Grant agree with this, claiming that “[Yahweh] sits in authority and commands obedience.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the standard that he has set over the other gods must be followed to a t or repercussions will be enforced. The fault of the other gods is made clear back in v. 2, where Yahweh questions the gods:

82:2 *How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?*

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<sup>23</sup> Heiser, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 643.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> W. Dennis Tucker Jr., and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life*, Vol. 2, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 218.

Yahweh is rebuking the other gods present for the lack of justice in their judgements, which are often leaning in favor of the wicked rather than the innocent. He goes on to correct them in vv. 3-4. This correction and instruction demonstrate the power that Yahweh possesses over the other gods, further cementing that he is speaking to beings lesser than himself, rather than to himself directly in a communal conversation. For this reason, as well as the lack of the trinitarian view for the original audience and the word structure of the passage, taking this passage to be speaking of a meeting among the members of the Trinity would be an error in interpretation.

Second, another view that is held regarding this passage is that the original author is presenting a rhetorical example to diminish the other gods into nonexistence and uphold a monotheistic view. This view is mainly due to the widely agreed upon dating of Psalm 82 in the later centuries of the Old Testament period. Because of the commonly held theory of the evolution of monotheism from polytheism throughout the Old Testament, many assume that the Psalm is free of any literal presence of other gods, in contrast to earlier texts in the canon, such as seen in Deuteronomy above. Heiser summarizes this succinctly through his explanation that “many scholars consider Psalm 82 to be . . . a deliberate rhetorical use of Israel's polytheistic past to declare the new outlook of monotheism.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, Psalm 82 is often seen as the author’s attempt to call Israel forward away from the belief in the existence of the other gods and into a monotheistic worldview.

The reasoning for this claim is drawn from the final verse of the Psalm:

82:8 *Arise, O God, judge the earth;  
for you shall inherit all the nations!*

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<sup>27</sup> Heiser, 3.



In the Psalm's conclusion, "the psalmist closes with a prayer that echoes his declaration in the opening verse."<sup>28</sup> This calling forth for Yahweh to "judge the earth" by the author supports the view of the Psalm being rhetorical. Because of the placement of the Psalm in the exilic to post-exilic time period, this functions as an encouragement to the exilic community, with the idea being that "Yahweh will rise up and take the nations as his own having sentenced the other gods to death." The rhetorical view dares to claim that the author is merely using the final verse as a rhetorical tactic "to encourage the exilic community."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it asserts that the verse is giving this encouragement by saying that God will take back power from the other gods. This clearly goes against God being presented as all-powerful throughout the canon. The author would see no need in Yahweh retrieving power from the other gods, as all power belonged to him. Earlier texts present God as fully above and in control of the heavenly realm and everything in it, including other gods. Note, for example, Psalms 24 and 29 in particular, "long recognized as some of the most ancient material in the canon,"<sup>30</sup> :

*24:10 Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord of hosts,  
he is the King of glory!*

*29:1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

The rhetorical argument for Psalm 82 does not adequately acknowledge that Yahweh had already possessed the power necessary to rule over the nations. The original view was not concerned with giving him any more authority to take charge against the evils that the exiled people of Israel were seeing in the world around them. This was already established, even in the earliest dated texts. On the contrary, the other gods are used in this passage to solidify Yahweh's

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<sup>28</sup> Tucker and Grant, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Heiser, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

ability to control and rebuke those very gods who were in charge of the nations, and doing a lackluster job at it, allowing injustice to flourish in “[defending] the unjust and [showing] preferential treatment to the wicked.”<sup>31</sup> With Yahweh already in control of these gods, the psalmist is instead calling for him to stay true to his character and do something about those who are slacking on the job in their rule over the nations. The rhetorical view attempts to uphold its monotheistic agenda and in doing so twists the intentions of the passage into the psalmist calling Yahweh to take power that he should already possess and is shown to clearly possess in earlier Psalms.

As the interpreter moves past the trinitarian and rhetorical views and allows the text to speak for itself in its own context, Yahweh’s complete overshadowing of the authority of the other gods is made evident. He alone is able to call the divine council forward in order to rebuke and correct them, as well as sentencing them for their flawed rule. The later authorship of this Psalm did not reflect a monotheistic view, as one might expect. Instead, the references to the other gods in the passage, along with the clear order of authority, with Yahweh on a level of his own, leads to the conclusion that the worldview of the original audience didn’t consider other gods as nonexistent. Yahweh stands triumphant among the gods, continuing to command them and sentence them to human-like death if their rule did not align with what he had willed. Yahweh’s sense of justice overcomes the lack of effective leadership found in the heavenly rulers of the nations. It is up to the reader to trust in the true overseer of the heavenly realm, not in the lower beings who must answer ultimately to him.

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<sup>31</sup> Tucker and Grant, 217.

## Isaiah

The book of Isaiah addresses both the pre-exilic and exilic time periods. The people of Israel were being warned of their impending exile for some of the book and then encouraged through it while they were in Babylon. As with Psalm 82, it is often argued that by the time Isaiah was written, the people of Israel had fully adopted a monotheistic worldview, disregarding them as purely idols. Passages in Isaiah such as 45:21 have often been used to prove this:

*45:21 Declare and present your case;  
let them take counsel together!  
Who told this long ago?  
Who declared it of old?  
Was it not I, the LORD?  
And there is no other god besides me,  
a righteous God and a Savior;  
there is none besides me.*

At first glance, this seems obvious. The LORD seems to be proclaiming that he is the only god there is; that for his people to believe in the existence of other gods would be foolishness.

However, Heiser argues that in Isaiah as well there is a more complicated belief system present.

The clearest evidence he provides involves the presence of similar phrases in Isaiah to those used in Deuteronomy 4 and 32.

Heiser states that “in some cases the construction containing an excluding preposition, or the adverbial phrase found in Deut. 4:35, 39 and 32:12, 39 is identical to those occurring in the denial phrases in Isaiah.”<sup>32</sup> The difficulty is that those desiring to claim monotheism in Isaiah must be ready to explain these matching phrases. For example, in four of the denial phrases (present in Isaiah 43:10; 44:5, 8; and 45:5), the construction of the negative particle *v-ayin* (none) and the preposition *mibbal'adai* (from beside me) are utilized in the same way as in

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<sup>32</sup> Heiser, 16-17.

Deuteronomy 4:35 and with the same thought as found in Deuteronomy 32:39.<sup>33</sup> In a similar fashion, two other denial phrases (both present in Isaiah 45:5), “point to the use of the preposition [*zulati*] to describe Yahweh’s relationship to other gods.”<sup>34</sup> This preposition is also coupled in this verse with *v-ayin*, in what has been established above to be present in Deuteronomy 4:35. Finally, another pair of denial phrases (present in 45:6 and 14) include *v-ayin ode*, which again is present in 4:35, but also in 4:39. Heiser goes on to list a total of eleven denial phrases, which include every instance in Isaiah where Yahweh seems, on the surface, to be presented as the only *elohim* in existence. However, if the Deuteronomy passages don’t argue for monotheism when they are correctly understood, as stated prior, and the Isaiah passages are parallel in both meaning and phrasing, then there is no significant evidence left for monotheism in Isaiah.

### Conclusion

Having examined Deuteronomy, Psalm 82, and Isaiah, the view of the biblical authors concerning the existence of divine beings, also referred to as gods, can now be addressed. It has been discovered that the passages that are often used to argue for Yahweh being the sole god in existence do not in fact do so. Instead, the views found in these three Old Testament books reveal a very different understanding which was held by the original authors. To determine this worldview, one must use all the evidence presented.

In Deuteronomy, Yahweh is viewed by the original authors as being “best in class.” He is above all the other gods, who exist, and is not threatened by any means by their power. Yahweh warns against the Israelites worshipping other gods, as the other nations had fallen into doing, in part because their doing so would be to worship a far lesser alternative to the ultimate Creator.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, in Deuteronomy, the author did not deny the existence of other gods, but instead their ability to stand beside the almighty God of Israel.

In Psalm 82, Yahweh is similarly shown to possess supreme power over the gods. He “holds judgement” among the divine council, demonstrating his authority over them (Ps. 82:1). His power to condemn the gods is also evident when they are sentenced to die like men (82:7). Lastly, in the concluding verse of the Psalm, Yahweh is called by the psalmist to “arise” and “judge the earth,” “[inheriting] all the nations” as a final act of dominance over the other gods (82:8). The same view found in Deuteronomy remains present in Psalm 82, as Yahweh is overwhelmingly more powerful and holds more authority than the other gods in existence.

Finally, Isaiah, the latter half of which is often used to argue monotheism in the Old Testament, was found to have far more evidence for an alternative view than would be often assumed. The denial phrases found in Isaiah that seem to point towards Yahweh being the only god in existence are actually the same as those present in Deuteronomy. The terminology is identical, not only in some, but in all of those found in Isaiah. This leads to a discrepancy if one wishes to claim that the denial phrases mean one thing in Deuteronomy and another in Isaiah. Therefore, it is much more reasonable to conclude that in both cases Yahweh is being elevated to a class of his own, or at least a position of “best in class,” rather than the passages in Isaiah denying the existence of other gods.

Taking into consideration the evidence from these three Old Testament books, it is clear that the Israelites believed in the existence of more than one god. There are questions that naturally arises from this, however: if the original authors and audience of the Old Testament believed in the existence of other gods, does this mean that they were polytheistic? If not polytheistic, what modern term best fits the Old Testament view? To answer these, it will be

better to depart from the terms listed above and focus more on what is actually represented in the text. In fact, it is more accurate to conclude that none of these four views encompass what the original authors understood as true. Similar to how monotheism falls short, each of the others have their own weaknesses that can be remedied and improved upon to better communicate the view found in the OT.

Henotheism could be suggested as a better fit but falls short in one key area. The view would fail to inherently elevate Yahweh above the other gods. If this category of belief is taken, one would have to believe that Yahweh is on the same level as any other god worshipped at the time of the authors. As Heiser describes, “henotheism assumes all gods are species equals.”<sup>35</sup> This is clearly not true, as it has been established in the preceding sections that God is “best in class” to the point that he is in a class of his own. No other god compares to him in both power and authority, as the gods draw both from Yahweh, who allots them according to his own purposes. Therefore, “henotheistic” is not a fitting description for the worldview of the biblical authors. Monolatry, on the other hand, draws even closer to an accurate picture of the OT view. All worship is also focused on God, with none being given to the lesser gods, who are believed to exist, therefore avoiding the trap of resembling polytheism or monotheism. While monolatry seems to be the best fit out of the four, the one aspect that it is lacking is that only worship is the focus, not “Yahweh’s nature and attribute with respect to the other gods.”<sup>36</sup> While the Israelite view is monolatrous in that it identifies only Yahweh as worthy of worship, this does not address the other essential belief that their God was above and beyond all of the others, to the point that they draw their power, authority, and even their existence from him. Therefore, both henotheism

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 29.

and monolatry, while harkening to parts of the original authors' belief system, do not fully express what is present in the text.

A view must be discovered, then, to accurately convey what the Scripture is communicating. Yahweh must be sovereign over the other gods in his very nature, a "solitary 'otherness' with respect to all that is, in heaven and in earth."<sup>37</sup> Nothing created him, since through him everything has been created. The original writers other gods clearly believed the gods to have existed, completely under control by Israel's God. They are in no way deserving of worship, as Yahweh alone is worthy of being glorified. The life the gods possess is fully from him. Finally, Yahweh's nature is completely unique. Only when these aspects of the original authors' worldview are taken into account can one truly understand what the authors believed.

What must be taken away, then, as one attempts to dive deeper into these passages and others throughout the OT, is that one must first be willing to accept the worldview of the original audience as it was. In God's timing, he chose these authors (where they were in their life, their culture, their worldview, etc.) and wrote the text through them. It is in the best interest of the interpreter to gather as much information about the original audience as possible. In humbling oneself to be receptive of the authors' beliefs, one can more fully appreciate the Scripture through which God communicates. This principle is evident throughout the above sections. Without doing so, many have and will miss out on a clearer, more accurate understanding of the worldview behind the text.

Second, it is of utmost importance to understand that God's authority and power are not challenged by the mere existence of other gods. On the contrary, it only serves to bolster his grandeur that, even though other spiritual beings of this caliber do exist, they pale in comparison

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

to the Almighty One. God's willingness to give his own authority to the other gods, to rule over the nations, demonstrates just how much more he is than they. It can even be seen in Psalm 82 that he can take away that power at any moment and reduce the other gods to the status of mortality. This will encourage anyone who trusts in Yahweh and worships him, for he alone is worthy of both.

Last, it is important to decide whether the modern Christian must refer to the deities in the OT as gods or whether "spiritual beings" will suffice. The hosts of heaven were regarded as *elohim* in the days of the authors. However, it does not follow that just because they used the same word to refer to the beings and to Yahweh that people of today should or must. In fact, it may be more helpful to continue to use the distinct classifications, in order not to confuse or mislead others who aren't familiar the contextual view rather than what they have been taught. In the end, calling God by his title and the other spiritual beings by theirs will only aid in clearer communication. The only time that the heavenly hosts should be called gods is when the original text does not distinguish between them and Yahweh, in order to more fully represent the original meaning of the text.

There is no greater assurance than to know that the One who made all things and controls all things also orchestrated a way for himself and his creation to converse. Even with the sinful tendencies that Israel had, namely serving other beings than Yahweh, he still met them where they were and chose to write through them a text that has lasted millennia. Through discovering the reality of the original authors' worldview, this is made evident. The same God who met them there remains present today and is willing to do the same for his people if they will confide in him alone.



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