

Sessions 1-4: Introduction to the Unseen Realm- An illustration in Hermeneutics

*All Bible references are from NASB unless noted otherwise.

Basic Hermeneutical Principles (Hermeneutics: the art and science of Biblical interpretation)

1. **Historical Grammatical-** Examining the historical context of when a specific book of the Bible was written. This could include geography, time period, politics, culture, socio-economics and language. It seeks to understand the original intention of the writer to the writer's audience at that particular time and place. It takes into consideration literary genre as well as the grammar and linguistic distinctives of that particular time and place of the language itself. An example is Matthew 5:45, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous." I grew up in western Oregon where it rains (drizzles) 7+ months of the year. As I first read this passage in Matthew, the interpretation was clear to me. God sends His blessings (sun is good) and cursings (rain is bad) on all the world equally without discrimination. As you examine my thinking, what is wrong with this interpretation? 😊
 What separates us in our current situation from Moses writing the book of Genesis?
 What separates us in our current situation from Asaph writing Psalm 82?
 Questions to ask in seeking a proper interpretation:
 - A. Who is the writer? (Occupation? Background? Training? -Paul as pharisee/rabbi; farmer, shepherd, etc.)
 - B. When is the writer? At what point in history did the writing occur?
 - C. Who is the intended audience? What is the culture from whom and to whom it was written?
 - D. What is the style of writing (law, narrative, poetry, proverb, gospel, parables, epistles, apocalyptic)?
 - E. What/why was the book written? What was the occasion that precipitated the writing?
 - F. What language is the writing? (Hebrew, Akkadian, Babylonian, Aramaic, Greek, Egyptian, Latin?)
 - G. What are the idioms, figures of speech or other syntax distinctives of the language being used? (evil eye: compare NKJ Matt 6:21-23; 20:15; Mark 7:22 with Prov 28:22)
 - H. Where is the writer composing his material? (Babylon? Israel? Judah? Prison? Patmos?)
 - I. What did the original audience understand the text to mean in THEIR own context?
 - J. How does progressive revelation contribute to the understanding and meaning of the text to the original audience?
2. **Analogy of Scripture-** This principle comes after appropriate exegesis (examining the text itself in detail as in number 1 above). The goal is to allow less clear Scriptural passages to be interpreted by more clear passages. This is the principle of inter-textuality or Scripture interpreting Scripture. Often this happens when two opposing viewpoints are "proof texting" each other. The general idea not just relates to perspicuity of Scripture (clarity of a specific passage), but also the quantity of the passages. An example is John 15:10, "If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love." This verse taken in isolation gives evidence of a works-based system of earning God's favor. If we compare other Scripture how do the other passages give more light on the total understanding of enjoying God's love? (Romans 5:8; 9:13; etc.)
3. **Analogy of Faith-** The understanding of this principle is to recognize that there is a significant amount of theological understanding taken from the sum of all Scripture. This is known as systematic theology which not only bases its theology on the Biblical text, but also uses reasoning/logic and philosophical considerations to arrive at a coherent theological and Biblical doctrine. Through this principle of "Analogy of Faith" a comparison is made between those individual passages which seem to teach a certain concept, but when compared with the sum total of the rest of Scripture and comprehensive theological doctrines, additional clarity is provided. An example is Psalm 91:4. Does God have wings? Does God have eyes? An arm? Mormons think so and are clearly wrong.

4. **Textual History-** Infallible? Inerrant? (c.f. Matt 17:21; 1 John 5:7 in NIV and NKJV; Psa 22:16 DSS, LXX vs MT)

^{NASB} **Matthew 17:21** "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

^{NIV} **Matthew 17:21**

^{NKJ} **Matthew 17:21** "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

^{NASB} **1 John 5:7** For there are three that testify:

^{NKJ} **1 John 5:7** For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

^{JPS} **Psalm 22:16** (22-17) For dogs have encompassed me; a company of evil-doers have inclosed me; like a lion, they are at my hands and my feet. (Jewish Publication Society- translated from Hebrew Masoretic Text- 907 A.D.)

^{NETS} **Psalm 21:17** (16) because many dogs encircled me, a gathering of evildoers surrounded me. They gouged my hands and feet; (Septuagint English Version – OT translated in Greek 1st century B.C.)

^{QBE} **Psalm 22:16** For dogs are *all around me*; a gang of evildoers encircles me. They have pierced my hands and my feet. (Translation is based on the Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew texts- 1st century B.C.)

Note: In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity (love). We often talk of doctrines which are of first importance which we should fight or even die for (i.e. Jesus as Lord and Savior, Trinity, the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus as the perfect propitiation for our sin, faith in Jesus plus nothing; the Five Solas: Scripture alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, Grace alone, for God's Glory alone). Additionally, we recognize those doctrines that are of secondary importance. These are those that don't (or shouldn't) put into question anyone's salvation or spirituality (i.e. infant baptism, millennial viewpoints, views on election/predestination). Others recognize tertiary (third) doctrines. This becomes subjective to some degree, but some of these other non-essential doctrines include: worship styles, eschatology (rapture viewpoints), six 24-hour day creation. This study on the unseen realm falls into this third category in my opinion.

Acts 17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily** to see whether these things were so.

Proverbs 18:13 The one who gives an answer before he listens— that is his folly and his shame. (NET)

The Unseen Realm Introduction

Romans 8:14-21 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are **sons of God**.¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of **adoption as sons** by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are **children of God**,¹⁷ and if **children**, **heirs** also, **heirs** of God and fellow **heirs** with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be **glorified** with *Him*.¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the **glory** that is to be **revealed to us**.¹⁹ For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the **revealing of the sons of God**.²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the **glory** of the **children of God**.

1. This passage in Romans 8 brings out several concepts that serve as the back drop for this entire study. By the end of the study, we will understand more fully the meaning of the words in bold above.
 - A. There is an emphasis on not just the glory of Jesus (8:17), but glory that is revealed in/to the children of God (8:18, 21).
 - B. There is an emphasis on the glory being limited to the "children of God" ("sons of God"). This phraseology becomes very important throughout the OT and this study.
 - C. There is an emphasis on inheritance (being heirs of God and fellow heirs with Jesus). What is part of Jesus' inheritance that we also will participate in? (see Psalm 2:8; Rev 2:26; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3)

- D. There is an emphasis on a redemption/restoration that is cosmic in scale (the creation itself: 8:19, 20, 21), but is specifically connected to the timing of the children of God receiving their inheritance and glory.
2. The unseen realm is that dimension, domain, sphere that exists outside of direct human perception. We see this expressed for the angels in Jude 6 and also 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 for humanity.
- A. **Jude 1:6** And angels who did not keep their **own domain** (governmental rulership/realm- non-spatial designation), but abandoned their **proper abode** (spatial designation), He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day.
- B. **2 Corinthians 5:1-4** For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our **dwelling** (same Greek word for spatial designation from Jude 6) from heaven, ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.
3. The unseen (non-human) realm is inhabited by the MANY beings known in the OT as *elohim*. There are four main Hebrew words that reveal the nature of these various beings are: *El* (singular), *Elim* (plural), *Eloah* (singular), *Elohim* (plural). What does the English word **God** mean? What does the English word **god** mean? Hebrew has no capitals. What do we mean by the word “divine” or “deity”? (2 Peter 1:3,4; Acts 17:29). Apotheosis? This is a concept in ancient and modern (Mormonism) religions where a human is exalted or elevated to divine or deity status.

A. **Hebrew definitions** of *Elohim* word group (*El, Eloah, Elim, etc.*) in OT:

1) “**Yahweh**”- the one and only uncreated, creator God in which there is none like Him. He is known as Yahweh and is species-unique- “Who is like Yahweh” (Psalm 89:6-8; 113:5; 86:8; 29:1; Ex 15:11; 2 Chron 6:14; Isa 40:25; 46:5)? NO OTHER BEING HAS GOD’S ESSENCE OR UNIQUE NATURE as uncreated Creator, etc. Yahweh is the “God of gods”. What does this mean about being “God of gods”?

Deut. 10:17 "For the LORD your God is the **God of gods** and the **Lord of lords**, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.

Ps. 136:2 Give thanks to the **God of gods**, For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Dan. 2:47 The king answered Daniel and said, "Surely your God is a **God of gods** and a **Lord of kings** and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery."

Dan. 11:36 "Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the **God of gods**; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done.

Exodus 15:11 "Who is like You **among the gods**, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?"

Psalm 86:8 There is no one like You **among the gods**, O Lord, Nor are there any works like Yours.

Psalm 95:3 For the LORD is a great God And a great King above **all gods**.

Psalm 96:4-5 For the LORD is great and certainly worthy of praise; he is more awesome than **all gods**. ⁵ For all **the gods of the nations** are worthless, but the LORD made the sky. (NET)

Psalm 96:5 For all the gods of the peoples are **worthless idols**, but the LORD made the heavens. (ESV)

Psalm 97:7 Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images, Who boast themselves of idols; **Worship Him, all you gods**.

Psalm 97:9 For You are the LORD Most High over all the earth; You are exalted far above **all gods**.

Psalm 135:5 For I know that the LORD is great And that our Lord is above **all gods**.

2) “**god/gods**”- Generally, all **non-human truly existing** beings who live in the abode of the spiritual/unseen realm, but who can access our human physical realm with permission. One of the foremost characteristics of an *elohim* is their “deathlessness”. This becomes important later as we seek to interpret certain passages. There are numerous types of beings other than humans as we examine the entire Bible. These would include

angels, cherubim, archangels, shades, etc. The most important point to keep in front of us is that ALL non-human existent beings in the OT are considered under the classification of *elohim*. This is similar to the classification in the Bible of Jew and Gentile. If you aren't a Jew, you are a gentile. In this case, if a being isn't a human (living), then they are an *elohim*. See number 4 below for a qualification about dead and disembodied human spirit. We will be examining the full cast of Biblical characters from the unseen realm in subsequent sessions.

3) “**god/gods**”- false **non-existent** gods who were worshiped by many cultures and were often actualized physically through the use of idols (stone, wood, etc.).

4) “**the spirit of a dead human**”- There is only one instance of this in 1 Samuel 28:13 where Samuel is called up from the underworld to speak with Saul through the actions of the witch of Endor. Samuel's spirit is called an *elohim*. This is the only time in the entire OT that the word *elohim* is used to refer to a human.

5) “**judges**”? – Some English versions have translated the word “elohim” as “judges” in Exodus 21:6; 22:8, 9. However, OT scholarship is divided over whether this is an accurate representation of the Hebrew *elohim*. Most current scholarship rejects the view that the word could or should be translated as “judges”. I think it is conclusive that the word NEVER represents “judges” and is simply a tradition going back many centuries in the English versions. Notice a comparison between the NASB and ESV below. All underlined words are the same Hebrew word *elohim*.

^{ESV} **Exodus 21:6** then his master shall bring him to God (*elohim*), and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

^{NASB} **Exodus 21:6** then his master shall bring him to God (*elohim*), then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently. (KJV- “judges”)

^{ESV} **Exodus 22:8** If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God (*elohim*) to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. ⁹ For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before God (*elohim*). The one whom God (*elohim*) condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.

^{NASB} **Exodus 22:8** "If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges (*elohim*), to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor's property. ⁹ "For every breach of trust, *whether it is* for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, *or* for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges (*elohim*); he whom the judges (*elohim*) condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

The first lady is a woman.
All women are first lady?

WHO ARE ELOHIM? (video)

Yahweh is an elohim.
All elohim are Yahweh?

B. Modern definitions

Monotheism- current modern definition is that there is only one true creator God while no other omnipotent gods exist. Originally, this was a 17th century invention of a word that would contrast with atheism.

Henotheism- many gods who are species-equal, but due to socio-political factors, one god is lifted above others and worshiped in isolation, but with no specific prohibitions of others worshiping their own deity. A form of relativism.

Monolatry- the worship of only one god with specific prohibitions of worshiping other gods.

4. The Divine Council idea in the OT.

Job 38:4-7 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell *Me*, if you have understanding, ⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? ⁶ "On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, ⁷ When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "**Let Us** make man in **Our image**, according to **Our likeness**; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Isaiah 6:1-8 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth *with it* and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who **will go for Us**?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Psalm 82:1 *A Psalm of Asaph.* God (*elohim*) has taken his place in the **divine council**; in the **midst of the gods** (*elohim*) he holds judgment: (ESV)

Psalm 82:1 A Psalm of Asaph. God takes His stand in His **own congregation**; He judges in the midst of the **rulers** (*elohim*).

Psalm 82:6 I said, "You are **gods** (*elohim*), And all of you are **sons of the Most High** (*sons of elyon*)

Psalm 89:5-8 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the **assembly of the holy ones!** ⁶ For who **in the skies** can be compared to the LORD? Who among the **heavenly beings** (Hebrew- **sons of God**) is like the LORD, ⁷ a God greatly to be feared in the **council of the holy ones**, and awesome above all who are around him? ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? (ESV)

Psalm 29:1 *A Psalm of David.* Ascribe to the LORD, O **heavenly beings** (Hebrew- *sons of Elohim*), ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (ESV)

Job 5:1 "Call now, is there anyone who will answer you? And to which of the **holy ones** will you turn?"

Job 15:8 Have you listened in the **council of God**? And do you limit wisdom to yourself? (ESV)

Job 15:15 "Behold, He puts no trust in His **holy ones**, And the heavens are not pure in His sight;

Jeremiah 23:18 "But who has stood in the **council of the LORD**, That he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened?"

1 Kings 22:19 Micaiah said, "Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the **host of heaven** standing by Him on His right and on His left. ²⁰ "The LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said this while another said that. ²¹ "Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' ²² "The LORD said to him, 'How?' And he said, 'I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' Then He said, 'You are to entice *him* and also prevail. Go and do so.' ²³ "Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you."

Daniel 7:9 "I kept looking Until **thrones** were set up, And the Ancient of Days took *His* seat; His vesture *was* like white snow And the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne *was* ablaze with flames, Its wheels a burning fire.

Daniel 4:17 "This sentence is by the **decree of the angelic watchers** And the decision is a **command of the holy ones**, In order that the living may know That the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, And bestows it on whom He wishes And sets over it the lowliest of men."

Daniel 4:24 this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the **decree of the Most High**, which has come upon my lord the king:

5. The Divine Council idea in the NT.

Matt. 19:28 And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve **thrones**, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Lk. 22:30 that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on **thrones** judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Col. 1:16 For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether **thrones** or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him.

Revelation 3:21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My **throne**, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

Rev. 4:4 Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones; and upon the **thrones** *I saw* twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

Rev. 11:16 And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their **thrones** before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God,

Rev. 20:4 Then I saw **thrones**, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I *saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

6. Jesus as the "unique" (one and only unique) "Son of God" among the many "sons of God"

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His **only begotten Son**, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his **one and only Son**, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (NIV)

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his **only begotten son**;

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his **one and only son**, (NIV)

Matthew 8:29 And they cried out, saying, "What business do we have with each other, **Son of God**? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"

Luke 8:28 Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, **Son of the Most High God**? I beg You, do not torment me."

Mark 5:7 and shouting with a loud voice, he said, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, **Son of the Most High God**? I implore You by God, do not torment me!"

Luke 4:34 "Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are-- the **Holy One of God**!"

Hebrews 2:5-8 For he did not put the world to come, about which we are speaking, under the control of angels.

⁶ Instead someone testified somewhere: "What is man that you think of him or the son of man that you care for him?"

⁷ You made him lower than the angels **for a little while**. You crowned him with glory and honor. ⁸ You put all things under his control." For when he put all things under his control, he left nothing outside of his control. At present we do not yet see all things under his control, (NET)

Article on the DIVINE ASSEMBLY

Leland Ryken et al., Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 50–53.

The Bible presents us with an earthly world and a heavenly world, two interconnected-and sometimes indistinguishable-stages on which the biblical drama takes place. The view of the heavenly world focuses primarily on the divine throne room and related elements of divine royalty. This is the imagery of transcendence adapted by the Bible from its cultural environment. The gods of the ancient Near East were not spoken of in abstract terms-as theologians today might speak of divine sovereignty, omnipotence, omnipresence or aseity-they were vividly imaged in the language of kingship and warfare, love and fertility, house building and banqueting. And so also for Israel, to “do” theology was to tell God’s story and to fashion images and metaphors that both rightly described their subject and engaged the imagination. The theologians of the Bible-its poets and prophets, chroniclers and sages-borrowed, refashioned and subverted the images and symbols of the gods of their neighboring cultures. Their audiences expected to be offered glimpses of the heavenly court as a means of understanding the ways of God.

The Divine Assembly in its Cultural Setting

In Mesopotamian and Canaanite religion it was customary to speak of the high gods as kingly figures. Such a god was imagined to be enthroned in a heavenly palace (on which his earthly temple was modeled). The god had a heavenly assembly, or council, a deliberative body invested with the task of guiding the fate of the cosmos (see Cosmology). In the Mesopotamian myth of Enuma Elish, the gods are presided over by the high god Anu. In a Canaanite texts from Ugarit, we find the high god El presiding over the major and minor gods and addressing them as “gods” or “my sons.” Israel speaks of Yahweh as a heavenly king who presides over his council. But in the OT we find the status of the “gods” subverted, for they are demoted to subservient figures, frequently called angels or spirits.

The dwelling place of God is imaged as a cosmic mountain, which in Canaanite mythology is Mount Zaphon in north Syria, the dwelling place of the gods. Isaiah condemns the hubris of the king of Babylon as he deigns to set his throne “on the mount of assembly in the far north” and make himself “like the Most High” (Is 14:13 RSV). In the OT, God has chosen Zion as the site for his temple-palace. As the earthly counterpart to his heavenly dwelling place, Zion is called the “holy mountain of God” (Ezek 28:14, 16). It is “beautiful in elevation, . . . the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King” (Ps 48:2 RSV; cf. Ps 46:4). Thus in the biblical imagination the Canaanite mountain of the gods is displaced and the status of “holy mountain” and “mount of the assembly” is transferred to Zion. If Zion’s present elevation is admittedly not as grand as Mount Hermon and other mountains to the north, in the last days “the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains” (Is 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–3 RSV). Since it is the seat of the divine assembly, “out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” and from there God “shall judge between the nations” (Is 2:3–4; Mic 4:2–3 RSV).

The divine assembly is the celestial counterpart to the social institution of the “elders in the gate” (e.g., Deut 21:19; Ruth 4:1–11; Ps 107:32; Prov 31:23). It is a board of advisors or counselors with whom the supreme deity consults, an “assembly of the holy ones” (Ps 98:5). In context of war, its members can be called the “hosts,” or “army” of heaven, who engage in divine warfare under the “Lord of Hosts” (see Divine Warrior). Psalm 82 evokes the scene of the divine assembly: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (Ps 82:1 RSV). But in this case God is displeased with the members of the divine assembly. The assembly cowers as God hauls them onto the royal carpet: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” (Ps 82:2 RSV). For their heedlessness toward the weak and needy as well as their other shortcomings, God pronounces judgment on them: “I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler” (Ps 82:6–7 NIV).

Divine Assembly and Prophetic Messengers

The story of the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22 offers a fascinating glimpse of deliberation within the heavenly council. On the earthly plane, Ahab, the king of Israel, is deliberating with Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, over whether they should attack Ramoth Gilead. They inquire of the fawning court prophets, who heartily agree that they should attack. But then they inquire of Micaiah, who is always heedless of the party line, Micaiah speaks of his vision of the divine council:

“I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go forth and do so.’ ” (1 Kings 22:19–22 RSV)

This imagery of the prophet having access to the divine council—and being a messenger for the council—clarifies the “call” scene of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 6 the prophet has a vision of “the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple” (Is 6:1 RSV). Here the earthly temple provides entrance to the heavenly temple (complete with marvelous creatures attending the throne), and the heavenly kingship of Yahweh is juxtaposed with the earthly kingship of Uzziah (Is 6:1). Struck by the wondrous sight of Yahweh the king and overcome with a sense of personal and corporate sin, Isaiah receives forgiveness. He then hears the Lord deliberating before his council: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The response comes not from a “god” within the divine assembly but from Isaiah himself, “Here I am! Send me.” And the Lord responds, “Go, and say to this people . . .” (Is 6:8–9 RSV). Likewise we should perhaps understand Isaiah 40:1–2—“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (RSV)—as words uttered by Yahweh to the heralds assembled in divine council. The voice of the heavenly herald then cries out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD” (Is 40:3 RSV).

The Assembly of Gods and Angels

It is clear that the Bible does not regard the “gods” of the divine assembly as peers of God: “There is none like thee among the gods, O Lord” (Ps 86:8 RSV; cf. Ps 135:5). “For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and terrible above all that are round about him?” (Ps 89:6–7 RSV; cf. Ps 29:1; 97:7; 138:1). Although among Israel’s neighbors these gods were clearly regarded as deities, later Judaism came to speak of them as high-ranking angels. In keeping with this view, the LXX often translates these “sons of God” or even “gods” as angels (Deut 32:8; Ps 8:5; 138:1 [LXX 137:1]). The NT often follows the LXX, so that “thou hast made him a little less than God” (or “gods,” Ps 8:5) appears as “a little lower than the angels” in Hebrews 2:7.

In the book of Job the divine assembly plays a role near the outset. It provides the background for understanding “the Satan” who enters on “a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD” (Job 1:6 RSV). In Job, Satan is not presented as the evil spiritual being we come to know in the NT but as one who plays a legal role in the heavenly court as “the accuser.” Even though he is not loyal to God, Satan, by virtue of his rank as a divine being, is permitted to appear at meetings of the council on a day when “the sons of God” come to present themselves before the Lord (Job 1:6; 2:1). Satan’s role as “accuser” requires this (Zech 3:1; Rev 12:10).

Another picture of the divine council is offered in Daniel 7. Here the scene is more highly developed. The council assembles for judgment of the great empires of the earth, depicted as dreadful monsters. As Daniel “looks” in his vision, he sees “thrones” placed and the “ancient of days,” with raiment “white as snow” and hair “like pure wool” taking his seat on a throne of “fiery flames, its wheels . . . burning with fire” and issuing forth “a stream of fire” (Dan 7:9–10 RSV). The council is attended by a stunning myriad of heavenly beings: “a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan 7:10 RSV). Their business is to render judgment, and the books are opened. The result is that the dominion of the beasts is taken away, with the final beast causing a great commotion and then being executed (Dan 7:11).

Then, on a cloud chariot, “one like a son of man” arrives at the assembly. This being, representing the “saints of the Most High” (Dan 7:27 RSV), is honored by the council with universal and eternal sovereignty (Dan 7:14). When the scene concludes, Daniel, his head spinning from the spectacle, approaches one of those standing in the assembly and inquires about the meaning of this event. A full explanation ensues (Dan 7:15–28). This fully elaborated vision of the divine assembly is a prototype for many later scenes of divine assembly and throne room in Jewish apocalyptic literature.

The Divine Assembly in the New Testament

In the NT the inner circle of the divine assembly consists of angels who surround the heavenly throne. The primary theme is worship, and there is an implied understanding that the worship of the church mirrors the worship of heaven. In Colossians 2:18 Paul exhorts the Colossian believers not to be influenced by those who place heavy demands on their access to the “worship of angels,” that is, the heavenly worship conducted by angels within the heavenly assembly (this meaning is more likely than “worship directed toward angels”). Paul warns against those who advocate a rigorous asceticism that purports to offer access to this heavenly worship (Col 2:20–23). Instead, Paul uses the imagery of believers being “raised with Christ” and setting their hearts on “things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1 NIV). Paul reminds the Philippians of their heavenly citizenship (Phil 3:20) and the Ephesians are blessed “in the heavenly realms” (Eph 1:3), for “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6 NIV).

But the divine assembly is most fully developed in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 4–5 the seer enters the heavenly throne room where he first observes God the Father seated on a throne and attended by four living creatures who ceaselessly sing his praise (Rev 4:6–8). In a further circle around the throne are twenty-four thrones (Rev 4:4) on which are seated twenty-four elders, angelic figures who fall down in reverence and cast their crowns before the throne, singing of the glory and majesty of God. In the hand of the one seated on the throne is a scroll that no one is worthy to open except for a Lamb “as though it had been slain” (RSV), standing between the throne and the circle of four living creatures (Rev 5:5–7).

The Lamb receives the same worship from the heavenly assembly as does the one on the throne, and the assembly enlarges to include angels “numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” and then to encompass the entire cosmos as “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein” join in the heavenly praise (Rev 5:11, 13 RSV). In a further scene we find 144,000 martyrs “who have come through the great tribulation” (Rev 7:14 RSV) joining the heavenly praise as they stand before the throne and the Lamb, praising God and the Lamb (Rev 7:9–12). In Revelation 14:1–5 the 144,000 appear again as a great army of saints accompanying the Lamb on Mount Zion.

The divine assembly in Revelation 4–5 is highly developed and transformed in comparison with the scenes we find in the OT, with its closest point of contact being Daniel 7. The emphasis on heavenly worship, is recapitulated in Revelation 19:1–8, though the motif of deliberation is present with the question of who will open the scroll (Rev 5:2–5) and takes more prominence in the judgment scene of Revelation 20. There we learn of “thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge” (Rev 20:4 NIV) and of a judgment that takes place before a “great white throne” (Rev 20:11–15). These heavenly assemblies are intimately linked to the destiny of the earth, its inhabitants and the spiritual world. Here, as in the OT, what transpires in the heavenly council has great consequences for the course of cosmic events.

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