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MONOTHEISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF DIVINE PLURALITY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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Summary

Most Hebrew Bible scholars believe that Israelite religion evolved from polytheism to monotheism, an evolution in which the biblical writers participated. The dominant version of this consensus is that this religious evolution culminated by the end of the exile or shortly thereafter. A minority perspective places the evolutionary end point later. At issue is the presence of the language of divine plurality, positive references to other gods (אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים) under YHWH's authority, in Jewish religious texts composed during and after the Second Temple period. This article surveys the language of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible and the sectarian literature at Qumran to show its conceptual continuity and longevity, and rejects the notion that it is incongruent with a belief in the uniqueness of YHWH.

1. Introduction

In 1991 the *Journal for Jewish Studies* published an intriguing article by Peter Hayman entitled, 'Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?' Hayman wrote:

In the academic world of twenty or thirty years ago it was conventional to hold that the story of Judaism was one of a gradual, but inexorable, evolution from a Canaanite/Israelite pagan and mythological environment into the pure light of an unsullied monotheism. The point at which this breakthrough into monotheism was achieved was a subject of debate, but most scholars seem to have agreed that it certainly took place.... It will be my contention in this paper that it is hardly ever appropriate to use the term monotheism to describe the Jewish idea of God, that no progress beyond the simple formulas of the book of

Deuteronomy can be discerned in Judaism before the philosophers of the Middle Ages, and that Judaism never escapes from the legacy of the battles for supremacy between Yahweh, Ba'al and El from which it emerged... . The pattern of Jewish beliefs about God remains monarchistic throughout. God is king of a heavenly court consisting of many other powerful beings, not always under his control.¹

Hayman's quotation illustrates that he would number himself among the majority of scholars who believe the Hebrew Bible reveals a religious progression from polytheism to monotheism. He disagrees, however, on the length of that evolution, placing its *terminus ad quem* much later than most. Hayman's contention is that references to multiple gods (semantically plural אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים) in a collective assembly under YHWH, considered a biblical signpost for pre-exilic polytheism, continue well into Second Temple Jewish literature and beyond. For Hayman, this phenomenon requires delaying the culmination of the intellectual achievement of monotheism until the Middle Ages.²

This writer believes the phenomenon of divine plurality language that survived the exile needs revisiting. Hayman's work focused on demonstrating that divine plurality extended through late antiquity. He consequently devoted attention to rabbinic texts supportive of his assertion.³ The presence of divine plurality language in Second Temple Jewish literature is much more abundant, however, making the phenomenon that drew Hayman's attention more readily apparent. The Qumran sectarian material is arguably the best source for illustrating that divine plurality language was used frequently during that period. Consequently, the Qumran material will be a focus here.

It is the contention of this writer that, while divine plurality language is not difficult to detect in later Jewish literature, Hayman's conclusion was misguided. The language of divine plurality in the Hebrew Bible and at Qumran is transparent, but does not justify the conclusion that either the biblical writers or Second Temple Jewish thinkers would have thought YHWH one among equals. Rather than

¹ Peter Hayman, 'Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?' *JJS* 42:1 (Spring 1991): 1–15 (esp. 1–2, 15).

² When referencing biblical material or in generic use, the present article spells אֱלֹהִים defectively. The full (*plene*) spelling is adopted with respect to Qumran material, as that corpus overwhelmingly witnesses the full spelling.

³ Hayman cited only two Qumran texts in his article: 1QM 15:14 and 4Q491 11, both of which contain the word אֱלִים ('gods').

propose that Judaism only became monotheistic at a much later time, divine plurality language in Jewish text corpuses like Qumran ought to prompt reconsideration of whether divine plurality language constitutes a coherent argument for the presumed evolution.

This article proposes that there is a straight-forward way to parse the language of divine plurality in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran material that is congruent with a religious commitment to the uniqueness of YHWH. The language in itself provides no argument for religious evolution to monotheism, and so its presence at Qumran fails as a rationale for extending the terminus of that alleged evolution. Towards presenting this perspective, this essay will first briefly overview the conceptual context of the academic discussion. It will then demonstrate the continuity of the divine plurality language between the Hebrew Bible and Qumran. Finally, it will offer its proposal for reconciling this language with a Second Temple Jewish commitment to the uniqueness of YHWH. The implication of this proposal will be that the biblical writers shared the same theological outlook as their Second Temple counterparts.⁴

2. Contextualising the Discussion

2.1. Describing Polytheism and Monotheism

Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have long known that Israelite religion included a belief in a divine assembly, or council, under YHWH.⁵ Since

⁴ The phrase ‘biblical writers’ includes all hands that contributed to the final form of the text. This writer is not claiming that polytheism was absent in ancient Israel. The Hebrew Bible frequently laments its existence, and archaeology has produced evidence for it. The focus is on the biblical writers and their intellectual-religious descendants. The argument will be that the biblical usage of plural divinity terms like אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים informs us that the writers did not assign the same attributes or qualities to all divine beings referenced by those terms. One among those divine beings (YHWH, the אֱלֹהִים of Israel) is unequivocally identified as inherently superior and distinct in comparison to all other אֱלֹהִים or אֱלִים.

⁵ For example: Pss. 29:1; 82:1, 6; 89:5–8; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; 38:7–8; 1 Kgs 22:13–23. See Gerald Cooke, ‘The Sons of (the) God(s)’, *ZAW* 76 (1964): 22–47; Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); J. Morgenstern, ‘The Mythological Background of Psalm 82’, *HUCA* 14 (1939): 29–126; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980); Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003);

this is a well-known feature of the ancient Near East's polytheistic religions, it is assumed by most scholars that the presence of a divine assembly is evidence of polytheism in Israel's religion. But there is much more to polytheism than divine plurality language. Polytheism is a *system* of belief that of necessity includes a range of concepts—concepts that are lacking in the religious conceptions of the biblical writers.

After noting the recency (17th century) of words like 'monotheism' and 'polytheism', Jan Assmann outlines the crucial elements necessary in defining polytheism: (1) a *cooperative* cosmology (more than one deity creates and maintains the world); (2) a *diversified*, politicized cultus (important deities are worshipped in multiple locations, especially urban centres; (3) mythic, *interactive* biography (gods are known in relation to other gods).⁶

Assmann also articulates the relationship (and differentiation) of monotheism and polytheism.

In polytheistic religions, the deities are clearly differentiated and personalized by name, shape, and function. The great achievement of polytheism is the articulation of a common semantic universe. It is this semantic dimension that makes the names translatable—that is, makes it possible for gods from different cultures or parts of a culture to be equated with one another.... In Mesopotamia, the pantheon is structured by strong hierarchical relations of subordination, and this, in the long run, fosters similar ideas of deep structural identity. The creation epic, the *Enuma Elish*, ends with a hymn to the chief god, Marduk, calling him by fifty names. The gods who are subordinated to Marduk become his names, aspects of his all-encompassing essence.... In Egypt, this concept of a Supreme Being comprising in his essence the whole pantheon goes back to the Ramesside period (13th century BC) and seems to be a reaction to Akhenaten's monotheistic revolution. It stresses the oneness of god while retaining the multiplicity of the divine.... The idea that the various nations worshiped basically the same deities but under different names and in different forms eventually led to the belief in a Supreme Being.... This superdeity is addressed by appellations such as *Hypsistos* (Supreme) and the widespread 'One-God' predication *Heis Theos*.⁷

Matitahu Tsevat, 'God and the Gods in Assembly', *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–1970): 123–37.

⁶ Jan Assmann, 'Monotheism and Polytheism', in *Ancient Religions* (ed. Sarah Iles Johnston; Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007): 17–31 (esp. 17–20).

⁷ Assmann, 'Monotheism and Polytheism', 24–27.

Assmann sees a progression in ancient Near Eastern religions towards the concept of *hypsistos* language and refers to it as ‘evolutionary monotheism.’ It is a description of henotheism, which allows the *system* of polytheism to remain intact while advocating the elevation of one supreme deity. Assmann is careful to distinguish this from ‘revolutionary monotheism’. He writes:

Whereas evolutionary monotheism may be seen as the final stage of polytheism, there is no evolutionary line leading from polytheism to revolutionary monotheism. This form of monotheism manifests itself in the first place as a negative or counter-religion, defining what god is not and how god should not be worshiped.⁸

This distinction is important in two respects for the subject matter of this paper. It recognises the ontological element in the religion of the biblical writers who were concerned with ‘what god is not’ (YHWH is unlike all other gods; he is unique) and ‘how god should not be worshiped’ (the isolation of cult to YHWH alone).⁹

These observations help frame the ensuing discussion in two ways. First, divine plurality language in the Hebrew Bible (and later) is not an adequate litmus test for polytheism. Polytheistic religion demands the system elements described by Assmann. Second, divine plurality language must not impinge on the two primary concerns for the biblical writers and later Judaism: the uniqueness of YHWH and the sole worship of YHWH.

2.2. The Divine Council

An inadequate conception of the meaning of monotheism as merely the acknowledgement of the existence of many divine beings has unfortunately caused confusion when it comes to the presence of a divine council under Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. Council references are regularly framed as reflecting the early stage of Israel’s religious evolution prior to the emergence of an intolerant monotheism. Historical forces, in particular the shock of the exile, are presumed to have been the catalyst that precipitated the decisive commitment to monotheism. As a strategy for coping with the exile, the biblical

⁸ Assmann, ‘Monotheism and Polytheism’, 28.

⁹ While scholars of Israelite religion may presume that Israelite worship of other gods was at some point acceptable during the biblical period, the concern of this article is to avoid speculation and focus on the received (canonical) text for how it presents the language of divine plurality and the nature of YHWH.

writers cast YHWH as the sovereign deity of all nations and sentenced the other gods to death (Psalm 82). YHWH thus emerged from the exile as the lone existing God.¹⁰

One would assume in the context of a zealous monotheistic revolution that a term like אֱלֹהִים ('gods') would be used with great care after the biblical period so as to avoid any hint of earlier, subsequently offensive, polytheism. But this is precisely what does *not* happen. The language of divine plurality persists well after the end of the exile. The Dead Sea Scrolls are perhaps the most telling demonstration of that persistence.

The presence of divine assembly members in the heavenly sanctuary described in Qumran texts like the *Shabbat Shiroth* has not gone unnoticed, but scholars have not noted the frequency of such language nor the implications of its obvious congruence to pre-exilic (allegedly) polytheistic expressions. The explicit terminology that purportedly evidences polytheism is for some reason semantically parsed as meaning 'angels' (מלאכים) when occurring in Qumran texts, but not in earlier material from the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ The weight of the prevailing consensus concerning an Israelite religious evolution appears to have produced an interpretative hesitation in scholars who have tried to deal with this vocabulary. Three examples are illustrative.

First, terminology that would unwaveringly be translated 'gods' (אֱלֹהִים) in the pre-exilic texts of the Hebrew Bible is often obscured when encountered in the Qumran material. In place of this straightforward translation readers find renderings such as 'divine beings', or the more transparent option is placed in quotation marks as though the rendering is artificial. For instance, in speaking of the inner sanctuary of the heavenly temple described in 4Q400 1 4 John C. Collins writes: 'These holy ones are also called "gods" (*'ēlīm*), angels, spirits, and princes.'¹²

Second, in a lengthy article related to the issue at hand, Michael Wise devotes over forty pages of analysis to articulating how several Qumran scrolls express the superiority of the God of Israel to the

¹⁰ This viewpoint is eloquently set forth by S. B. Parker, 'The Beginning of the Reign of God—Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy', *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995): 532–59.

¹¹ Since Qumran Hebrew is not pointed, the author has used only consonantal Hebrew forms when referring to textual forms in that material.

¹² John C. Collins, 'Powers in Heaven: God, Gods, and Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls', in *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. John C. Collins and Robert A. Kugler; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000): 9–20 (esp. 12).

angels.¹³ The problem is that the word מלאכים ('angels') never occurs in any of the text portions cited in the article title.¹⁴ On the other hand, plural אלים ('gods') and semantically plural אלוהים ('gods') occur with frequency. Wise assumes that since these texts are post-exilic, these Hebrew terms are to be translated 'angels', without offering any explanatory basis for the rendering.

Third, in her important work on the *Shabbat Shirot* texts at Qumran, Carol Newsom uses the term 'angelic *elim*' when encountering plural אלים ('gods') in the material.¹⁵ There is no biblical precedent for this combination and, as will become evident in the ensuing discussion, no theological need for blunting אלים or plural אלוהים. The term מלאך ('angel') means 'messenger' and therefore describes a task, not ontology.¹⁶ Viewed against the outlook of a religious worldview that had rejected polytheistic systems, speaking of 'angelic gods' would have been theologically awkward.

The disconnection between the clear terminology and its translation and interpretation becomes even more problematic in light of the actual

¹³ Michael O. Wise, 'מי כמוני באלים: A Study of 4Q491c, 4Q471b, 4Q427 7, and 1QHa 25:25–26:10', *DSD* 7:2 (2000): 173–219. This author's conclusion was reached on the basis of database searches of the texts covered in Wise's article. Two databases were used: Martin G. Abegg, Jr., *Qumran Sectarian Manuscripts* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003) and the digital edition of Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols.; Leiden; New York, NY: E.J. Brill, 1997–1998). Differences between the two databases are as follows (Abegg = García Martínez and Tigchelaar): 4Q491c=4Q491 11–12; 4Q471b=4Q471. The singular form (מלאך) also does not appear in these texts.

¹⁴ The text portions under Wise's focus were 4Q491c, 4Q471b, 4Q427 7, and 1QH^a 25:25–26:10. The lemma does occur in 1QH^a 25–26, but is found in col. 14, line 13 (מלאכי פנים; 'angels of the presence') and col. 24, line 10 (מלאכי שלום; 'angels of peace'). In neither case is there overlap with divine plurality language that would suggest 'angels' is a sensible rendering of אלים or plural אלוהים.

¹⁵ Carol A. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (HSM 27; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985): 23–24.

¹⁶ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999): 585–86. The close relationship between the vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible and the material of Ugaritic helps illustrate the point. At Ugarit, the cognate term *ml'k* ('messenger') was used of *'ilm* ('gods') who were dispatched by other gods to deliver messages (e.g., *KTU* 1.3.III:32; 1.3.VI:10–11; see Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [vol. 2; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003], 546). Members at all levels of the Ugaritic pantheon are referenced as *'ilm*, but they are not all referred to (individually or collectively) as *ml'km* ('messengers'). The term was used for a task or activity performed by a lesser deity on behalf of a superior one. Ancient bureaucracies were not conceived on egalitarian terms. See the discussion of divine council tiers in Mullen, *The Divine Council*, 175–208.

use of angel terminology in the scrolls. The plural מלאכים ('angels') occurs in close proximity to אלים ('gods') or semantically plural אלוהים ('gods') only twice in the Qumran corpus.¹⁷ In neither case is there sufficient warrant to conclude that the Qumran writers redefined these terms of pre-exilic divine plurality as angels.

The tension between the consensus perspective on Israel's evolution away from polytheism and this brief sampling of data raises obvious questions. If this evolution did indeed occur and was fundamental to Jewish religious and intellectual discussion about God, why did Second Temple writers use the older polytheistic terminology? Why not convey the evolution with clarity and employ מלאכים ('angels') or some other circumlocution? Why not eliminate language of the pre-exilic polytheistic council altogether, centuries after the exile? The fact that Jewish writers of this period felt free to use this presumably forbidden terminology ought to prompt reconsideration of how their material should be interpreted.

3. Divine Plurality Terminology in the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran Sectarian Scrolls

The Qumran sectarian material displays thorough acquaintance with pre-exilic Israel's divine council. Explicit references to a divine assembly and its divine members are abundant.¹⁸

3.1. The Council Proper

There are several lemmas in the Hebrew Bible for a heavenly assembly (עדה, דֹּר, סוּד, and קְהָל), each occurring alone or in construct with a *nomen rectum* that designated deity or the holy status of the group.¹⁹ At

¹⁷ See Abegg, *Qumran Sectarian Manuscripts*. The two instances are 4Q403 1 I.1 (מלאכי רום) (מלאכי רום); 'אלוהי [מ]לאכי רום'; '[to] the God of the exalted angels') and 4Q405 23 I.8 (במבואי) ('... אלי דעת בפתחי כבוד וכול מוצאי מלאכי קודש לממשלתם enter through the gates of glory, and through all the exits of the holy angels to their domains'). The first example simply bears witness to the idea that angels are lesser than God in the cosmic hierarchy. It provides no commentary on frequent divine plurality language occurring elsewhere in the scrolls. The second example seems to distinguish the gods from the angels via different temple locations.

¹⁸ All Qumran occurrences and the style of their citation come from Abegg, *Qumran Sectarian Manuscripts*.

¹⁹ Pss. 82:1; 89:6–8 (Heb); Jer. 23:18–22. Wording in other passages implies the presence of a group of divine beings (Gen. 1:26; 3:5, 22; 11:7; Isa. 40:1–8). Council

Qumran, only עדה ('assembly') and סוד ('council') appear in sectarian literature in unambiguous reference to a heavenly assembly.²⁰ The familiar עדת אל ('divine assembly'; 'assembly of God') of Psalm 82:1 occurs six times at Qumran, only one instance of which is a quotation of Psalm 82.²¹ There are also four instances of עדת אלים ('assembly of the gods').²² The variations [...] עדה לכול אלי ('assembly of all the gods of?') and עם אלים בעדת יחד ('with the gods in the assembly of the community') occur once and twice, respectively.²³ The expression סוד אלים ('council of the gods') occurs three times,²⁴ with סוד אלי טוהר ('council of the pure gods') occurring once.²⁵

There are no instances of divine council terminology with the specific Hebrew lemma for angels (מלאכים). This omission is curious given the modern consensus that a divine council in the Hebrew Bible points to vestigial polytheism prior to אלים and semantically plural אלוהים being downgraded to angels. One would anticipate that, had Jewish writers wanted to make the religious transformation clear, there would be specific references to a council of angels instead of a council of אלים and semantically plural אלוהים.

The location of the pre-exilic council in the Hebrew Bible is described with terms found in the literature of her polytheistic neighbours, such as Ugarit. Examples include the 'heights' (מָרוֹם, בְּמוֹת) or 'heights of the north' (יִרְבְּתֵי צָפוֹן).²⁶ At Qumran, the God of Israel is the 'God of the exalted heights' (אלוהי מרומים הרמים) who is 'among all the gods of knowledge' (בכול אלי דעת).²⁷ The well-known cosmic temple of the *Shabbat Shirot* is explicitly referred to as the 'heights' in scenes with multiple אלים. For example, 4Q400 1 I.20

meetings are described in 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Dan. 7:9–10; Isa. 6:1–11; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7. See S. B. Parker, 'Council', *DDD*:204–208 for ancient Near Eastern parallels.

²⁰ In addition to the references that appear in the ensuing discussion, see 4Q401 5 4.

²¹ 1QM 4:9; 4Q401 11 3; 4Q427 7 I.14; 4Q427 8 I.10; 4Q457b 1 I.5; 11Q13 2 10. The last reference is a citation of Ps. 82:1.

²² 1QM 1:10; 1Q22 1 IV.1; 4Q400 2 7; 4Q491 11 I.12.

²³ 4Q400 1 I.4 and 4Q427 7 II.9; 4Q431 2 8.

²⁴ 4Q400 1 II.9; 4Q418 69 II.15; 4Q511 10 11.

²⁵ 4Q286 7 I.6.

²⁶ Isa. 14:13–14; 24:21; Ps. 148:1; Mic. 6:6.

²⁷ 4Q403 1 I.30–31; 11Q17 2 4. The phrase in the latter reference is slightly different: רום מרומי כול מרומי רום. See also 4Q511 10 11 (=4Q510 1); 11Q13 II.10–11. This last passage quotes Ps. 82:1 and then identifies the place where the gods are being judged as the 'heights' (מרום).

references ‘the gods, priests of the exalted heights’, אֱלֹהִים כּוֹהֲנֵי מְרוֹמֵי רֹם.²⁸

3.2. *The Divine Members of the Council*

There are a dramatic number of occurrences of אֱלֹהִים and semantically plural אֱלֹהִים in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

a. אֱלֹהִים

According to Abegg’s database of the Qumran sectarian scrolls, there are 106 occurrences of אֱלֹהִים in the sectarian material.²⁹ Eleven of those instances that occur in juxtaposition with council vocabulary have already been noted. Of the remaining aggregate, the familiar בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים of the Hebrew Bible (Pss. 29:1; 89:7 [Eng 6]) occurs five times.³⁰ The remaining instances occur in isolation or in phrases that are not found in the Hebrew Bible. Some of these phrases convey the notion of a collective of אֱלֹהִים. For example, the phrase כּוֹל אֱלֹהִים (‘all the gods’), occasionally with the construct form אֱלֹהִים modified by another noun is found eighteen times.³¹ כּוֹל צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהִים (‘all the hosts of the gods’) occurs twice.³²

None of the references to אֱלֹהִים are negative or polemic. The אֱלֹהִים in the scrolls are not theological foils for denigration in or outside YHWH’s jurisdiction. The God of Israel is the ‘God of (these) gods’. He is above them in the unseen cosmic hierarchy. This status is

²⁸ Other examples include: 4Q402 4 9 (=Mas1k=MasShirShabb); 4Q404f 2+3AB (=4Q403 1 I; 4Q405 3 II); 4Q403 1 I.30–34 (=4QShirShabb^d).

²⁹ 1QM 1:10,11; 14:15, 16, 17; 15:14; 17:7; 18:4,6; 1QH^a 15:28; 18:8; 24:11; 27:3; 2 I.3, 10; 11:8; 1Q22 1 IV.1; 1Q35 1 2; 4Q166 1 II.6; 4Q181 1 4; 4Q248 1 3; 4Q286 2 2; 4Q286 7 I.6; 4Q381 15 6; 4Q400 1 I.4,20; 4Q400 1 II.9, 17; 4Q400 2 1,7; 4Q401 14 I.5 (2×),7; 4Q401 16 1; 30 1; 4Q402 4 8; 4Q402 6 3; 4Q402 9 2; 4Q403 1 I.14, 18, 21, 26, 31, 33, 34, 35, 38 (2×); 4Q403 1 II.26, 33, 35; 4Q404 2 2; 4Q404 4 6, 7; 4Q405 4–5 1, 2, 3; 4Q405 13 2, 5; 4Q405 14–15 I.3; 4Q405 19 3; 4Q405 23 I.8; 4Q418 69 II.15; 4Q418 81+81a 4; 4Q423 8 4; 4Q427 7 I.8, 11; 4Q427 7 II.9; 4Q428 8 2; 4Q428 9 3; 4Q428 15 3; 4Q431 I.4,7; 4Q431 2 8; 4Q471b 1a-d 1; 4Q471b 1a-d5; 4Q471b 1a-d8; 4Q491 8–10 I.13 (2×),14; 4Q491 10 II.15; 4Q491 11 I.12,14,18; 4Q491 13 1; 4Q491 14–15 8 (2×),11; 4Q491 24 3, 4; 4Q496 1–2 2; 4Q503 48–50 8; 4Q503 65 2; 4Q510 1 2; 4Q511 10 11; 4Q511 16 4; 5Q13 1 6; 11Q11 2 10; 11Q13 2 14; 11Q17 3 5, 9; 11Q17 4 1, 10; 11Q17 5 7; 11Q17 6 4; 11Q17 8 7.

³⁰ 1QH^a 2 I.3, 10; 4Q381 15 6; 4Q491 24 4; 5Q13 1 6.

³¹ 1QH^a 11 8; 4Q400 1 I.4; 4Q402 6 3; 4Q403 1 I.14, 18; 4Q403 1 I.35, 38; 4Q403 1 II.33, 35; 4Q404 4 6; 4Q405 4–5 3; 4Q405 13 2; 4Q418 81+81a 4; 4Q423 8 4; 4Q491 24 3; 11Q13 2 14; 11Q17 3 5, 9.

³² 4Q503 48–50 8; 4Q503 65 2.

expressed in the Qumran material with **אל אלים** (once)³³ and **אלוהי אלים** (eight times).³⁴

b. Semantically Plural **אלוהים**

The noun **אלוהים** occurs over five hundred times in Abegg's database (absolute or construct form). This writer has found 70 occurrences where context indicates it is semantically plural.³⁵ This number excludes references to idols, foreign gods ('other gods'), and citation of passages from the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Ps. 82:1b). The spiritual nature of these **אלוהים** in the theology of the sectarian writers is indicated by phrases like **רוחות אלוהים** ('spirits of the gods') and **רוחות אלוהים חיים** ('spirits of the living gods').³⁶

As previously noted, for the Qumran sectarian writers, the God of Israel is higher than these other gods ('God of gods [**אל אלים**]'). This superiority is also expressed with respect to phrases pointing to multiple **אלוהים**. The phrases **אל אלוהים** ('God of gods') and **אלוהי אלוהים** ('God of gods') each occur one time.³⁷

By way of summary, there are nearly 180 instances of explicit divine plurality in the sectarian Qumran scrolls, a number *far greater than in the Hebrew Bible*. Many of these instances are found in unequivocal divine council contexts of the type associated with the allegedly polytheistic stage of the religion of biblical Israel. These gods are found in the heavenly temple-heights praising God and serving him. Angels (**מלאכים**) are seldom found in these contexts. When they are, there is no clear instance where **אלים** or semantically plural **אלוהים** are described as **מלאכים**. The data therefore portray a theological situation quite contrary to what would be expected if Jewish theological thinking was moving away from polytheistic belief towards an intolerant monotheism.

³³ 4Q403 1 II.26.

³⁴ 4Q401 16 1; 4Q402 4 8; 4Q402 9 2; 4Q403 1 I.26; 4Q511 16 4; 11Q11 2 10; 11Q17 4 3; 11Q17 5 7.

³⁵ 4Q400 1 I.2; 4Q400 1 II.7; 4Q400 2 2, 3, 5; 4Q400 3 I.3; 4Q401 1-2 5; 4Q401 14 I.8; 4Q402 3 II.12; 4Q402 4 7, 9, 10; 4Q403 1 I.2, 32, 33, 36, 40, 43, 44, 46; 4Q403 1 II.5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 16, 20; 4Q404 5 5; 4Q405 4-5 4; 4Q405 6 5, 7; 4Q405 14-15 I.5, 6, 8; 4Q405 18 3; 4Q405 19 2, 4, 5, 6, 7; 4Q405 20 II-22 3, 7, 8, 11, 13; 4Q405 23 I.4, 5, 6, 13; 4Q511 8 12; 11Q17 2 6; 11Q17 4 8, 10; 11Q17 5 3, 4, 6; 11Q17 6 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; 11Q17 7 5, 10, 11, 13; 11Q17 8 4, 6, 8.

³⁶ 4Q405 6 7 and 4Q405 20 II-22:11, respectively.

³⁷ 4Q403 1 II.20 and 4Q511 8 12, respectively.

The question to consider next is straight-forward: Do the data indicate retention of polytheism among the sectarian Jewish writers at Qumran (and presumably wherever else the phenomenon can be found), or is there another way to understand the language of divine plurality?

4. Qumran's Divine Plurality Language and Second Temple Jewish Monotheism

It would seem from this survey of Qumran sectarian material that Hayman's assertion about monotheism being a misplaced concept in Jewish studies is a defensible one. This author, however, would disagree. The assertion can only be sustained if (1) the terms אֱלֹהִים and semantically plural אֱלֹהִים are attached to a specific set of shared attributes, and (2) the biblical and Qumran writers did not consider YHWH unique among multiple אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים by some criteria.

Both of these assumptions are demonstrably flawed. The biblical writers—and, by extension, their intellectual heirs in the Second Temple period—did not use the term אֱלֹהִים exclusively of the God of Israel, nor was each referent of the term deemed equal in attributes:³⁸

³⁸ The term אֱלֹהִים is not used of human beings. The contrary is at times presumed by interpreters who wish to see the council of divine beings in Psalm 82 as a group of Israel's elders. The occurrences of אֱלֹהִים in Judg. 18 refer to God himself; the elders selected in that passage are never described with the term. Other passages, such as Exod. 21:2–6; 22:6–8 [Eng., 22:7–9], which describes the voluntary retention of a household servant, are ambiguous. On one hand, the plural predicator in Exod. 22:6 with אֱלֹהִים as subject is no guarantee that the subject is plural. See M. Heiser, 'Should אֱלֹהִים (ēlōhīm) with Plural Predication Be Translated "Gods"?' *BT* 61:3 (July 2010): 123–36. If the אֱלֹהִים is semantically singular, its omission in Deut. 15:17 is likely due to the secularizing of the ceremony. See J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 150; M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992): 223. If one regards the noun as semantically plural, there is no coherent rationale for deleting a reference to human judges. Given the context of Deuteronomy's theological agenda, the plural אֱלֹהִים would refer to divine beings, or perhaps *teraphim*, both of which could lead to idolatry. See Cyrus Gordon, 'אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges', *JBL* 54:3 (Sept 1935): 129–44. In like manner, the original orientation of אֱלֹהִים in Psalm 45:6–7 can quite coherently be God himself (e.g. J. Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms 42–89* [ed. Tremper Longman III; vol. 2; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006], 58). In any event, if one considers the term as describing the king in divine terms as an adaptation of ancient Near Eastern thought, the term cannot be extended to anyone who was *not* the king.

- YHWH, the God of Israel (over 2000 times)³⁹
- The אֱלֹהִים of YHWH's assembly (Ps. 82:1, 6; Ps. 89:5–8)
- The אֱלֹהִים of foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:33; Deut. 32:8–9, 43 [with LXX, Qumran⁴⁰])
- 'Demons' (שְׂדִים) who are אֱלֹהִים (Deut. 32:17)⁴¹
- The disembodied human dead are אֱלֹהִים (1 Sam. 28:13)
- The Angel of Yahweh (Gen. 35:7)⁴²

The question we must ask in view of this usage is straight-forward: Would the biblical writers have considered all these אֱלֹהִים as *ontologically* equivalent? This writer believes this question would have been no intellectual struggle. It would have been absurd to suggest to a biblical writer that the departed human dead or quasi-monstrous beings like שְׂדִים were equal to YHWH. In regard to the former, the God of

³⁹ For more precise numbers, see Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997): 116–17.

⁴⁰ Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut. 32:8, which reads בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ('sons of Israel'). See P. W. Skehan, 'A Fragment of the "Song of Moses" (Deut. 32) from Qumran', *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12–15; idem, 'Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text', *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, 'A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV. 4QDt^b, 4QDt^c, 4QDt^d, 4QDt^e, 4QDt^f, 4QDt^g, 4QDt^h, 4QDtⁱ, 4QDt^j, 4QDt^k, 4QDt^l', (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992): 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): 75–79; P. Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32*, 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 514–18.

⁴¹ Regarding Deut. 32:17, English translations reflect disagreement over primarily two issues: whether to render אֱלֹהִים as singular or plural and how to translate the verbless clause in which it appears לֹא אֱלֹהִים. The word אֱלֹהִים is a defective spelling of the lemma אֱלֹהִים. A computer search of the Hebrew Bible (BHS) reveals that the lemma אֱלֹהִים occurs 58 times. There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where אֱלֹהִים is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun. The only place where such an option might appear to be workable is 2 Kgs 17:31, where the text informs us that 'the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim (Kethiv: אֱלֹהִים סַפְרַיִם; Qere: אֱלֹהֵי סַפְרַיִם).' The Qere reads the first lemma not as אֱלֹהִים but rather אֱלֹהֵים. For a treatment of the verbless clause syntax, see M. Heiser, 'Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?' *BT* 59:3 (July 2008): 137–45.

⁴² This last identification is uncertain. The plural predication with האֱלֹהִים as subject is very possibly designed to blur the distinction between God and the Angel of Yahweh (cp. Gen. 48:15–16 and its dual subject with singular verb), who elsewhere appears in human form. See M. Heiser, '(*elōhîm*) with Plural Predication', 123–36. Additionally, some scholars would presume that Gen 32:1–2 also identifies angels (מלאכים) as אֱלֹהִים. See Stephen Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *JANES* 14 (1982): 37–60 (esp. 54).

Israel was considered the judge of the dead (1 Sam. 2:6; Ps. 49:14–15). Regarding the latter, their inferior status in the ancient Near Eastern conceptions of pantheon and divinity has prompted some scholars to consider them supernatural but not divine.⁴³

This leaves us with the אֱלֹהִים of YHWH's council and the surrounding nations. The two groups are of course linked by the cosmic-geographical world-view articulated in passages like Deuteronomy 32:8–9 (cp. Deut. 4:19–20).⁴⁴ The biblical writers are careful to articulate the notion that YHWH is superior to all other אֱלֹהִים.⁴⁵ There is none beside him; he is unique and incomparable.⁴⁶

⁴³ John H. Walton, 'Demons in Mesopotamia and Israel: Exploring the Category of Non-Divine but Supernatural Entities', in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014): 229–46.

⁴⁴ Many scholars do indeed presuppose that Deut. 32:8–9 has YHWH as one among equal gods under a distinct deity, El (Elyon) and that Psalm 82 should be read in that light. See David Frankel, 'El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82: 6–8', *JHS* 10 (2011); Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 48; Parker, 'Reign of God', 546. This perspective has been critiqued in detail elsewhere. See Michael S. Heiser, 'Does Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible Demonstrate an Evolution from Polytheism to Monotheism in Israelite Religion?' *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament* 1:1 (2012): 1–24; idem, 'Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8–9 and Psalm 82?' *HIPHIL* 3 (2006). Space constraints allow only the following observations: (1) This reading of Deut. 32:8–9 ignores the El epithets in the preceding verses (Deut. 32:6–7) that are attributed to YHWH, thus identifying YHWH with El; (2) Deut. 4:19–20 has YHWH 'taking' (לָקַח) his portion, not having it bestowed by a superior; (3) Reading Psalm 82 in light of this approach to Deut. 32:8–9 has El as the speaking voice in the psalm, which results in various points of incoherence in the flow of the psalm.

⁴⁵ This assertion of superiority can be found in the earliest material in the Hebrew Bible, such as Exod. 15:11, 18. Contrary to what is presumed by those scholars who argue that the supremacy of YHWH is a late development in biblical theology, the notion of the kingship of YHWH is ancient, also appearing in some of the oldest biblical material and passages that are certainly pre-exilic (e.g., Pss. 24; 29:1; 47:2). On the dating and setting of these ancient psalms, see J. J. M. Roberts, 'The Religio-Political Setting of Psalm 47', *BASOR* 221 (Feb 1976): 132; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973): 151–57; idem., 'Notes on a Canaanite Psalm in the Old Testament', *BASOR* 117 (1950): 19–21; F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975): 45, n. 59.

⁴⁶ Phrases such as 'there is no god besides me' (אֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי) and 'besides me there is no other' (אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדִּי) do not deny the existence of other אֱלֹהִים. This is readily demonstrated by the fact that the phrases occur in passages that presume the division of the nations and their allotment to other gods (e.g. Deut. 4:35, 39 [cp. Deut. 4:19–20] and Deut. 32:29 [cp. Deut. 32:8–9, 43]). This sort of phrasing is also used of Nineveh and Babylon, where the point cannot be non-existence, but incomparability (Zeph. 2:15; Isa. 47:8, 10). For discussions of the Hebrew Bible's 'denial phrases' demonstrating their meaning is incomparability, see Michael S. Heiser, 'Monotheism,

Exodus 15:11: ‘Who is like you among the gods (אֱלֹהִים), Yahweh?’

Deuteronomy 3:24: ‘What god (אֱלֹהִים) is there in the heaven or on the earth who can do according to your works and according to your mighty deeds?’

1 Kings 8:23: ‘O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no god (אֱלֹהִים) like you in the heavens above or on earth beneath...’

Psalms 97:9: ‘For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth. You are highly exalted above all gods (אֱלֹהִים).’

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh that are never assigned to another אֱלֹהִים. Yahweh is all powerful (Jer. 32:17, 27; Pss. 72:18; 115:3), the sovereign king over the other אֱלֹהִים (Ps. 95:3; Dan. 4:35; 1 Kgs 22:19), the creator of the other members of his host-council (Ps. 148:1–5; Neh. 9:6; cp. Job 38:7; Deut. 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17), and the lone אֱלֹהִים who deserves worship from the other אֱלֹהִים (Ps. 29:1). Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique (‘You alone are Yahweh’).

This writer contends, therefore, that the term אֱלֹהִים itself cannot be taken as an indication of polytheism. But what are we to make of the broad application of the term by biblical writers?

There is one aspect that unifies all the entities described with the word אֱלֹהִים by the biblical writers that seems to have gone unnoticed for resolving the semantic-religious conundrum: They are all inhabitants of the divine or supernatural realm.⁴⁷ In Israelite

Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible’, *BBR* 18:1 (2008): 4–13; H. Rechenmacher, ‘Außer mir gibt es keinen Gott!’ Eine sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Studie zur Ausschließlichkeitsformel (ATSAT 49; St. Ottilien, 1997): 97–114; Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism* (FAT 2. Reihe 1; Mohr-Siebeck, 2003): 82–84; Catrin H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of ‘ani hû Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (WUNT 113, II; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2000): 39–52.

⁴⁷ The discussion applies to אֱלֹהִים as well. The data show that אֱלֹהִים and semantically plural אֱלֹהִים were used interchangeably in phrases (e.g. בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים [Ps. 29:1; 89:6] cp. אֱלֹהִים [Job 38:7]; אֱלֹהִים [Exod. 15:11] cp. אֱלֹהִים [1 Kgs 8:23; Ps. 86:8]). The research of two other scholars on the meaning of אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew body deserves attention in this regard. Burnett found that biblical אֱלֹהִים covers the same semantic range as similar words in cognate languages: a general sense of ‘god’; the gods of other nations; images (idols) of those gods; a general sense of ‘divinity’; abstract qualities (when used as adjectival genitive); and ‘divine beings’ (Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* [SBLDS 183; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2001]: 54–58). Burnett made no attempt to ascertain what conceptually unites these usages. Wardlaw’s analysis concluded that biblical אֱלֹהִים has the following senses: ‘God’ (a title for YHWH, the God of Israel); foreign gods or their idols; idiomatic (the term is used for lesser supernatural figures, such as בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים; ‘sons of God’). Wardlaw recognises that references to the disembodied dead (1 Sam. 28:13) or ‘demons’ (שְׂדֵיִם) have a general sense of divinity (‘spiritual being’) or ‘preternatural being’ without any indication of ontological sameness with the God of Israel (see Terence Randall

cosmology, this is the non-human realm; it is the realm of disembodiment. If we understand אֱלֹהִים as a semantic label for an entity from the disembodied non-human realm, the problems for orthodox Yahwism imagined by modern scholars with respect to multiple אֱלֹהִים disappear. All אֱלֹהִים by definition inhabit the supernatural realm. YHWH was an אֱלֹהִים, but no other אֱלֹהִים was YHWH.

5. Conclusion

This essay has argued that the presence of multiple אֱלֹהִים under YHWH's authority in the Hebrew Bible and the Qumran sectarian texts is not evidence of polytheism in the religious outlook of either corpus. It is methodologically inconsistent for scholars to insist that the same terms used in the same phrases in the same contexts point to polytheism in one corpus, but a downgrading of divine beings to angels under the constraints of an intolerant monotheism in another. The usage of divine plurality terms in the Hebrew Bible informs us that biblical writers used the terms to denote inhabitants of the disembodied spiritual world without respect to divergence in attributes and status within the unseen hierarchy. Consequently, use of these terms was no affront to the uniqueness of YHWH in the minds of the biblical writers and their later theological compatriots in the Second Temple period of Judaism. YHWH was an אֱלֹהִים, but no other אֱלֹהִים was YHWH.

Wardlaw, *Conceptualizing Words for God within the Pentateuch: A Cognitive-Semantic Investigation in Literary Context* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 96, 98, 109, 111). While it is of course possible and necessary for interpretation to distinguish those entities referenced by אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible, it is not the term itself that accomplishes those distinctions. Rather, it is the religious conceptions that are part of the cognitive framework of the biblical writers that enable such a parsing. Consequently, one cannot coherently argue that the term אֱלֹהִים when semantically plural constitutes a polytheistic system when the religious worldview of the writers using the term includes rejection of the very things that are integral to a polytheistic system (see the earlier references to Assmann). Put another way, the semantics of a term must be consistent with the cognitive framework of the writers who employ the vocabulary. The only option in the semantic range of אֱלֹהִים that explains its usage in a manner consistent with the religious-cognitive framework of the biblical writers is the general concept of 'divinity' or 'other-worldliness'.