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“Divine Plurality in the Dead Sea Scrolls”

0. Introduction

That the Dead Sea scrolls could force scholars and students of the Hebrew Bible to re-evaluate an axiomatic point of biblical understanding is no surprise. The finds at Qumran have earned their status as artifacts that prompted scholars to reconsider consensus opinion. That the scrolls could still do this over half a century after their discovery might be a bit more unexpected. And yet that is what I'm going to prod you to consider today, and in an area no less touchy than our understanding of Israelite and Jewish monotheism.

The notion that Israelite religion underwent an evolution that culminated in monotheism is widely accepted, even by non-specialists in biblical studies. Israelites began their spiritual journey like any other ancient Canaanite population, worshipping a variety of deities. El-Elyon and Yahweh were the main deities, positioned in the pantheon as father and one son among many in an Israelite pantheon or, as it is more commonly referred to, a divine council. Yahweh eventually rose to single prominence as El faded into the background. Eventually, in the 8th century BCE or so, various political and religious crises prompted Israelite thinkers and the biblical writers to fuse the two deities. Yahweh emerged as the lone deity for Israel. Worship of any other deity was forbidden, but the reality of other deities wasn't denied, even in the *Shema*. But as time went on, the book of Deuteronomy and the redaction of the Deuteronomistic History dealt with those other gods and the gods of Yahweh's own council, by downgrading them to angels. This demotion was accentuated by specific denial statements, repeated in still later canonical material, asserting that Yahweh was the only God who actually existed. The Dead Sea scrolls, so we are told, written by committed, ardent monotheists, are a reflection of this inspiring intellectual and theological climax. So what is there to talk about? As it turns out, plenty.

The question of whether we're really articulating the history of Israelite and Second Temple Jewish monotheism correctly is personal for me, since it was the focus of my dissertation under Michael Fox. While writing the dissertation I learned I wasn't alone; others had some of the same questions. Scholars whose primary focus is Second Temple Judaism or the New Testament have taken great interest in the last quarter century in range of topics that touch on monotheism. Among them are

Judaism's Two Powers in heaven teaching, exalted divine mediators in Jewish texts, angel veneration, pagan monotheisms, and the relationship of high Christology to all the aforementioned.¹ Several scholars have argued that the abundance of evidence drawn from Jewish religious texts for what has variously been termed "binitarianism," the "bifurcation of God," "ditheism," a "dyadic" godhead, and "exalted angelic mediators" simply disqualifies Judaism prior to the second or third century CE from the modern understanding of monotheism. In an oft-cited article asking whether monotheism is a misused word in Jewish studies, Peter Hayman noted, "it is hardly ever appropriate to use the term monotheism to describe the Jewish idea of God . . . hardly any variety of Judaism seems to have been able to manage just one divine entity."² Hayman concluded:

Monotheism . . . is indeed a misused word in Jewish Studies. 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. For most Jews, God is the sole object of worship, but he is not the only divine being. In particular, there is always a prominent number two in the hierarchy to whom Israel in particular relates. This pattern is inherited from biblical times.³

It is this last line that I want to draw on today as my focus: the pattern of divine plurality is drawn from biblical times. The Dead Sea scrolls will illustrate that the marks of divine plurality in Judaism are much broader than the godhead question. Like Hayman, I don't think the term

¹ Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Boyarin, Daniel. "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," *Harvard Theological Review* 94:3 (July, 2001), 243-284; idem, "Two Powers in Heaven; or, The Making of a Heresy," Pages 331-370 in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*. Leiden: Brill, 2003; Samuel S. Cohon, "The Unity of God: A Study in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Theology," *HUCA* 26 (1955): 425-479; Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*. Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 42. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998; Fossum, Jarl E. *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995; Hannah, Darrell D. *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 109. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, Hayman, Peter. "Monotheism - A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42:1 (Spring 1991): 1-15; 1999; Larry W. Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (1998): 3-26; idem, "The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship." Pages 187-213 in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements 63; edited by Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999); Ralph Marcus, "Divine Names and Attributes in Hellenistic Jewish Literature," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, 1931-32* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1933), 43-120; Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Loren Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995).

² Hayman, "Monotheism," 2, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

“monotheism” is very useful. Unlike Hayman, I don’t see Judaism—or even the biblical writers—as confused with respect to the uniqueness of their deity, Yahweh.

1. God and the Gods in the Dead Sea Scrolls

Let us begin with a question: **Would we see the Dead Sea scrolls as a reflection of the triumph of intolerant monotheism—as we moderns imagine that—if we knew that the scrolls contain an abundance of evidence for a plurality of gods in the setting of a divine council throne room under the God of Israel? Put another way, would we see the scrolls as part of the neat endpoint of Jewish monotheistic evolution if we saw precisely the same terms and scenes in them that scholars of Israelite religion use as evidence for Israelite polytheism?** As Baruch Halpern noted, “[We call] the gods angels with a sigh of relief; once more the ancient Israelite is rescued from the heresy of not being us.”⁴

My question is, of course, rhetorical. The scrolls are indeed filled with precisely the same sort of polytheistic nomenclature biblical scholars refer to with predictable regularity to demonstrate a pre-monotheistic religious worldview. None of the studies in Qumran angelology has approached the material with this in mind and scarcely even point it out. As I’ve considered this over the years it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the reason for this is that our view of the scrolls has been filtered through a pre-supposed interpretive. Two brief illustrations will suffice before we get to the data undergirding my assertion.

First, in an article published in 2000 entitled, “מי כמוני באלים: A Study of 4Q491c, 4Q471b, 4Q427, and 1QHa 25,” scrolls scholar Michael Wise devotes over forty pages of analysis to articulating how these scrolls express the superiority of the God of Israel to the angels.⁵ The problem is that the word מלאכים never occurs in any of them. On the other hand, plural אלים and אלוהים occur frequently. Wise simply assumes that since these texts are post-exilic, they are to be translated “angels.” A ingrained, pre-existing interpretive grid guides his translation and discussion. Second, in her important work on the *Shabbat Shirot* texts at Qumran, Carol Newsom uses the term “angelic *elim*” when encountering plural אלים in the material. Why do we presume a term like “angelic gods” makes any sense, especially when מלאכים is never partnered with אלים in the entirety of the Qumran corpus? The

⁴ Baruch Halpern, “Brisker Pipes than Poetry: The Development of Israelite Monotheism,” in *From Gods to God: The Dynamics of Iron Age Cosmologies* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010), 16.

⁵ Michael O. Wise,

answer is the susceptibility we all have to be conditioned by scholarly consensus. That struggle is real and understandable.

My goal from this point onward is to examine the sectarian literature of Qumran with all of you in order to demonstrate that the Qumran material clearly attests the same religious worldview as that of the allegedly polytheistic pre-exilic Israel.⁶ Far from articulating a faith that had long ago abandoned a divine council of plural gods as a vestigial belief, the Qumran sectarian material displays an acute interest in the council and its relationship to human beings.

1.1 *Pre-exilic Divine Council Terminology in the Scrolls*

There are several terms in the Hebrew Bible for the divine council itself, each occurring either alone, or in construct with a *nomen rectum* that designated deity or the holy members of the divine council: עדה, דֹּזָר, סוּד and קהל. Only עדה and סוּד appear in Qumran sectarian literature in definite reference to a heavenly council.

The most frequent terminology for the divine council in the sectarian texts is עדה in construct followed by a deity noun. These various phrasings occur 28 times in a context that denotes a divine council. If we restrict ourselves to the terms taken as indication of polytheism in pre-exilic Israelite religion (אלים and אלוהים), there are twelve instances of council lemmas with those terms. The familiar אל עדת of Ps 82:1 occurs six times⁷ and אלים (לכול) עדת six times.⁸ There are nearly twenty more references to a heavenly council using terms like בני שמים, קדושים, and אבירים.⁹ There are no instances of divine council terms with the specific biblical Hebrew word for angels, מלאכים.

The divine council at Qumran is also described by the noun סוּד in construct with a noun associated with heavenly beings. Restricting ourselves once again to the *nomen recta* אלים and אלוהים,

⁶ All search results come from Martin G. Abegg, Jr.'s *Qumran Sectarian Manuscripts* database.

⁷ 1Q33 (1QM), col. IV:9; 1QHa, col. XXVI:top 10; 4Q401 (4QShirShabb b), fig. 11:3; 4Q427, fig. 7, col. I:14; 4Q427, fig. 8, col. I:10; 11Q13 (11QMelch), frag 1,2i,3i,4, col. II:10.

⁸ 1Q22, col. IV:1; 1Q33 (1QM), col. I:10; 4Q400, fig.1, col. I:4; 4Q431, fig. 2, col. II:8; 4Q457b, fig. 1, col. I:5; 4Q491, fig. 11, col. I:12.

⁹ Respectively, 4Q466:3; 1QHa, col. XI:22; 4Q405 (4QShirShabb f), fig. 23, col. I:3; 4Q491, fig. 11, col. I:11; 1Q16, frags. 9-10, line 3. 1QS, col. V:20; 1Q28a, col. I:9; 1Q28a, col. II:16; 1Q33 (1QM), col. XII:7; 1QHa, col. III:bottom 10; 1QHa, col. V:14; 1QHa, col. XXV:3; 4Q181, fig. 1:4; 4Q381, fig. 76-77:7; 4Q428, fig. 20:3; 4Q491, fig. 11, col. I:14. The word קדושים may or may not refer to an assembly of divine beings headed by Yahweh. Sometimes this phrase is used of the human members of the Qumran community, who believed that they were, in effect, the divine council on earth. Most of the 11 occurrences cited here likely point to the heavenly assembly. See L. Dequeker, "The 'Saints of the Most High' in Qumran and Daniel," in *Syntax and Meaning: Studies in Hebrew Syntax and Biblical Exegesis* (ed. A.S. van der Woude; *OtSt* 18; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 108-187; C.H.W. Brekelmans, "The Saints of the Most High and Their Kingdoms," *כה 1940-1965* (ed. P.A.H. de Boer; *OtSt* 14; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 305-329.

The phrase עדה בחירו also occurs many times, but is ambiguous and has no clear divine council antecedent in the Hebrew Bible.

we find **סוד אלים** three times¹⁰ and **סוד אלוהים** once.¹¹ The phrase **בני שמים חבר סודם** occurs once.¹² There are ten more references to a heavenly council with phrases like **סוד עולמים** and **סוד קדושים**.¹³ Again there are no instances of **סוד** with Hebrew **מלאכים**.

1.2. The Pre-exilic Description of the Divine Council Meeting Place

Scholars of pre-exilic Israelite religion have noted on numerous occasions that the Hebrew Bible refers to the sanctuary of Yahweh, the meeting place of his council, by a variety of terms. The most noteworthy, due to their association with polytheistic Canaanite material are **הר מועד**, **אהל מועד**, **מעון**, and **הר מועד**. Yahweh's abode shelters Yahweh's throne, which is depicted variously as atop an expanse (**רקיע**) in Ezekiel 1, or as a cloud-chariot (**עב הענן**). Yahweh's throne and dwelling place were considered to be on a mountain located in the "heights of the north," the **ירכתי צפון**. The "height of Zion" was also a well-watered garden located in the **ירכתי צפון**. These "heights" are also referred to by other Hebrew terms, namely **מרומים**, **מרומים**, and **רמים**. All of these terms are found in the sectarian literature of Qumran, most notably the *Shabbat Shirot* (4Q400-407; 11Q17; Masada 1039-200).¹⁴ To keep things brief, there are a dozen instances where these terms occur in tandem with the council terms above and **אלים** or plural **אלוהים**. That number more than doubles if we include terms like **דביר**, **משכן**, **בסא**, and **מרכבה**, which occur regularly in the *Shabbat Shirot* in the context of Yahweh's throne and the presence of **אלים** or plural **אלוהים**. It is interesting to note that there are roughly a dozen instances of plural thrones (**מרכבות** or **כסאים**) in throne room council contexts. The significance of these terms and their immediate association with the throne room of Yahweh, the head of Israel's divine council, are underscored by our next consideration: the frequency of multiple **אלים** and **אלוהים**.

1.3. **אלים** and plural **אלוהים** in the Scrolls

¹⁰ 4Q400 (4QShirShabb a), frg. 1, col. II:9; 4Q418, frg. 69, col. II:15; 4Q511 (4QShirShabb b), frg. 10:11.

¹¹ 4Q401 (4QShirShabb b), frg. 5:4.

¹² 1QS, col. XI:8.

¹³ 1QHa, col. XI:21; 1QHa, col. XIX:12; 1QS, col. II:25; 1Q22, col. IV:1; 1QS, col. VIII:5; 1QHa, col. XII:25; 4Q259, frg. 2a1,2b-d, col. II:14; 4Q286, frg. 1a, col. II:b:4; 4Q428, frg. 19:7; 4Q502, frg. 19:1.

¹⁴ The scholarly critical edition is that of Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*. In her critical edition, Newsom affirms that the *Shabbat Shirot* belong to the sectarian literature of Qumran (pp. 1-5), but she later retreated from this position. See Carol Newsom, "'Sectually Explicit' Literature from Qumran," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. W.H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D.N. Freedman; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 167-187; idem, "'He Has Established for Himself Priests': Human and Angelic Priesthood in the Qumran Sabbath *Shirot*," in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The New York Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin* (ed. Lawrence Schiffman; JSPSup 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 103-104. More recently, however, the sectarian provenance of the *Shabbat Shirot* has been firmly established by comparative study of terminology in established sectarian documents with the *Shirot*. See Devorah Dimant, "The Qumran Manuscripts: Contents and Significance," in *Time to Prepare the Way in the Wilderness: Papers on the Qumran Scrolls by Fellows of the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1989-1990* (ed. Devorah Dimant and Lawrence Schiffman; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 23-58.

There are a dramatic number of occurrences of plural אלים and אלוהים in the Dead Sea scrolls. After searching for all absolute, construct, and prefixed forms in Martin Abegg's *Qumran Sectarian Scrolls* database, there are 146 occurrences of אלים (including בני אלים) and 57 occurrences of plural אלוהים. The actual number of occurrences of אלוהים is much higher, but I excluded every occurrence that calls for a singular translation, as well as those instances where the Qumran material appears to be referencing biblical phrasing about Israelites following "other gods." This means that there are just over 200 occurrences of אלים and plural אלוהים in the scrolls that are not negative and that cannot be construed as a reference to the God of Israel. It should be noted, though, that some of these occurrences are reconstructions based on precise parallels with other lines in the texts in which they are found. This is especially true of the *Shabbat Shirot*, whose contents are quite repetitive.

I also searched the same database for instances of plural מלאכים and found that the plural occurs just over 60 times, less than one-third of the frequency of אלים and plural אלוהים. Plural מלאכים are never identified as אלים or אלוהים (or vice versa), though there is one instance where a parallel might be intended, though that text is a reconstruction (only two consonants of מלאכים are present). There are, however, some conceptual parallels in the War Scroll (1QM) where the terms, though not appearing together, are used apparently interchangeably in the same contexts. For example, the War Scroll describes armies of "holy angels" in one passage and then speaks of the assembly of the gods confronting the assemblies of men in the great eschatological battle. Even though the terms for angels and gods do not directly overlap in the War Scroll, it seems reasonable to assume they are used interchangeably.

2. Evaluation of the Qumran Data in Light of Consensus Thought (chart)

Before (8 th / 7 th century onward)	After 8 th / 7 th century onward (Deut, DH, later prophetic writings; exilic and post-exilic writings)	My Proposal - “orthodoxy” present at all stages (viewing the council the same way) ¹⁵
<p>אלהים or אלים</p> <p>Plural אלים / אלהים references are evidence of polytheism (or vestigial polytheism) or monolatrous henotheism</p> <p>Divine council material adapted or adopted from Ugarit, which was polytheistic; An Israelite divine council that has plural gods shows Israelite polytheism (or vestigial polytheism)</p> <p>מלאכים</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> At Ugarit, ml'km are called 'lm; ml'km are gods, and so that term is typically connected to rank – it is viewed as a hierarchical role within the council of gods. However, it is also true that a high ranking deity can perform the role of a messenger, and so <i>the term is not always rank-specific</i>. These terms occur in divine council settings and so... <p>... we presume that an 'lm / 'lhm and ml'km relationship is about rank since, in a polytheistic system, all divine council members are called 'lm / 'lhm.</p> <p>... “the angels are gods”</p>	<p>אלהים or אלים</p> <p>מלאכים</p> <p>Plural אלים / אלהים begin to be transformed and downgraded to angels due to rise of monotheism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LXX at times uses <i>αγγελος</i> for a translation for אלים / אלהים <ul style="list-style-type: none"> this is *not* consistent¹⁶ Second Temple literature shows some conceptual overlap (e.g., War Scroll) These instances of conceptual overlap are few in number, not spread through the material; no explicit 1:1 equation made Far more references to אלים / אלהים language, often *in divine council* settings, and so ... <p>... we (as moderns) presume that an <i>ontological or attributional distinction</i> is being made by the writers by virtue of the plural use of the terms אלים / אלהים. As a result, in later writings, especially those associated with the exile and its intellectual aftermath, we feel the need to project an <i>ontological downgrading</i> of these terms.</p> <p>“the gods are now angels” (and angels are not gods)</p>	<p>אלהים or אלים</p> <p>מלאכים</p> <p>1. The angels are still gods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The downgrading approach in column two does not cohere with the data and is unnecessary because אלים / אלהים language in the Hebrew Bible was not about rank or one specific set of attributes. It was a “domain” or “place of residence” term. Four (perhaps five¹⁷) distinct entities are called אלהים in the HB: YHWH, council gods, “demons,” disembodied human dead. The term therefore does not directly denote attributes and rank. It denotes a resident of the disembodied realm. Within that realm, אלים / אלהים were distinguished in other ways. <p>2. There is still a divine council in 2nd temple Judaism, and council vocabulary no more *necessarily* speaks of polytheism in the DSS than it does elsewhere in the HB.</p> <p>3. The elevation of YHWH in terms of serving no other is based on a perceived uniqueness – “YHWH is an אלהים, no other אלהים are YHWH”; this uniqueness is described (not labeled with a term) in the HB in terms of pre-existence and creation of other אלהים. They serve YHWH by creation order and his own unique attributes.</p>

¹⁵ I speak here about the relationship of this terminology. The issue of whether YHWH and EL were or were not separate deities is a different but related issue. With respect to orthodox Israelite religion as described in the completed canon of the Hebrew Bible, I contend YHWH and EL were considered the same deity.

¹⁶ Several passages related to divine plurality do not have אלים / אלהים translated as angels (*αγγελος*). Examples include: Psa 82:1, 6 (LXX 81:1, 6]: *θεῶν, θεοὺς, Θεοί*; 1 Sam 28:13 (*θεοὺς*); Psa 94:3; 95:4; 96:9; 134:5 (*θεοὺς*); Exo 15:11 (*θεοίς*); Deut 32:17 (*θεοίς*).

¹⁷ Angels are never explicitly called אלים / אלהים in the Hebrew Bible, but depending on how one takes the plural in Gen 35:7 and triangulates back to the referent event mentioned in that passage, one can associate מלאכים with אלהים. For the others called אלהים: Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 2000 times); the אלהים of Yahweh's heavenly council (Psa 82; Psa 89; cf. Deut 32:8-9, 43; Psa 58:11) who were set over foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33); demons (*שדים*; Deut 32:17); the disembodied human dead (1 Sam 28:13).

(Still under #2 – Evaluation of Qumran Data...)

- Go through **lefthand column**
- Then **middle column**
- Go to what follows below...

3. A Proposed Re-orientation

In light of the sample texts and this brief survey of consensus thinking, I have some comments and questions to propose that will help me transition to my own current thinking on all this sketched in the third column. For me, the idea that the gods were downgraded to angels in Second Temple Judaism does not appear coherent for the following reasons:

1. When the references to multiple gods (אלים / אלהים) outnumber the references to angels (מלאכים) 3:1 in the same corpus, and there is no clear instance where אלים / אלהים are called מלאכים, it seems that a purposeful downgrading of the former to the latter is not reflected in the data.
2. The presumably polytheistic divine council of pre-exilic Israelite religion appears alive and well at Qumran. How could we disagree when the Qumran material gives us a number of identical terms in identical clusterings and identical contexts for the Israelite council terminology for the assembly, its meeting place, and its members?
3. All this prompts the obvious question: Why is it that scholars say that, after the exile, the divine council of Israel disappears and its gods are now angels? It seems clear to me that if one of the Qumran scribes who produced the texts we've looked at were here today, he wouldn't be buying that. So, on what basis are scholars making this judgment? Why do we feel safer referring to the אלים / אלהים as angels in later Jewish writings than earlier, biblical ones when the terms and contexts are the same?

I'll propose my own answer to these questions and explain how I think the discussion ought to be reframed.

It's my view that most scholars would answer the question of why the gods were downgraded to angels with "Mike, it's because of the rise of monotheism." I hope you can all see the fallacy of that answer at this point. The answer assumes what it seeks to prove. In other words, to prove the gods were downgraded to angels the evidence of monotheism is offered, and to prove that monotheism was a late development, it is argued that the gods became angels. It is a circular argument – an argument that then takes the 200 or so data points that reflect pre-exilic Israelite religion and filters them by means of that circular thought process.

I know the argument for the rise of monotheism consists of more than this circularity, but I can't address all the points due to time. I spent a good deal of time in my dissertation pointing out inconsistencies with those arguments as well.¹⁸ For example, there is the assertion of the lateness of the idea of Yahweh's global kingship. Rather than a late development initiated by the crisis of the exile, this idea, accompanied by explicit kingship language, is actually found several times in the earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Psalm 29. It wasn't a new idea in response to the exile. I also devoted quite a bit of space to the denial statements (e.g., "there is none besides me") in Deuteronomy and Deutero-Isaiah, showing that all eleven wordings of these statements can be found in passages or sections of early canonical material that affirm the existence of other gods. This means that these statements do not deny the existence of other *elohim*. Rather, they assert Yahweh's uniqueness and incomparability. This is completely in concert with what we've seen today from the Qumran data –Yahweh's incomparability in the divine council is asserted at Qumran many times. The outlook is the same. While I would never claim there were no Second Temple era Jews who thought in evolutionary terms as most scholars do now, I would argue that the idea would have been rejected by many Jews of the period. There was no monolithic theological shift in this direction; people of the same faith disagreed on important questions, even the nature of the One to the many in the unseen world—just like today.

As I sketched out in the third column of the chart, I think there is an easy way to navigate all this, but one that requires thinking about the term **אלהים** differently. I would propose that we must stop thinking of the term as moderns and think of it as it is used in the Hebrew Bible by ancient Semites. There were four (perhaps five¹⁹) distinct entities are called **אלהים** in the Hebrew Bible: YHWH, council

¹⁸ See also my BBR article (vol 18:1).

¹⁹ Angels are never explicitly called **אלים** / **אלהים** in the Hebrew Bible, but depending on how one takes the plural in Gen 35:7 and triangulates back to the referent event mentioned in that passage, one can associate **מלאכים** with **אלהים**.

gods, “demons,” and the disembodied human dead. The term therefore does not directly denote attributes and rank. Ask yourself this question: Would an Israelite really think that all these אלהים were equal? Is dear departed aunt Rivka the same as YHWH or one of His council members? Why not—they are all אלהים, aren’t they? If we accept that an Israelite could make distinctions between אלהים, then that requires us to acknowledge that they could believe in the reality of many אלהים without being polytheists as we think of that concept. The varied usage of the term אלהים compels us to a different understanding of the term different than our propensity to link the term to a set of attributes. In simplest terms, I would suggest that אלהים denotes a resident of the disembodied realm. Within that realm, אלים / אלהים were distinguished in other ways. Yahweh was an אלהים; but no other אלהים was Yahweh. This is what an orthodox Israelite or Jew believed, but we can’t capture it with a modern term like monotheism since we cannot escape the baggage of the term. The fact that there were multiple אלהים in an Israelites worldview did not mean polytheism, though it could, depending on the worship (or not) of those other אלהים. There is no need for an idea like the אלהים were eliminated (or needed elimination) from the religion by downgrading them to angels. The issue was loyalty to Yahweh conceived of as a unique deity, one who joined in covenant with Israel. And that idea is not contradicted by the divine plurality in the Dead Sea Scrolls.