



THE UNSEEN REALM

Recovering the supernatural
worldview of the Bible

Michael S. Heiser

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First Edition

To Roger

*Someday when the Lord sits me down to have a talk about this,
I'm going to remind him that you started it.*

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PART 1

FIRST THINGS

Reading Your Bible Again— for the First Time

WE ALL HAVE WATERSHED MOMENTS IN LIFE, CRITICAL TURNING POINTS where, from that moment on, nothing will ever be the same.

One such moment in my own life—the catalyst behind this book—came on a Sunday morning in church while I was in graduate school. I was chatting with a friend who, like me, was working on a PhD in Hebrew studies, killing a few minutes before the service started. I don't recall much of the conversation, though I'm sure it was something about Old Testament theology. But I'll never forget how it ended. My friend handed me his Hebrew Bible, open to Psalm 82. He said simply, "Here, read that ... look at it closely."

The first verse hit me like a bolt of lightning:

God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly;
he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].¹

I've indicated the Hebrew wording that caught my eye and put my heart in my throat. The word *elohim* occurs twice in this short verse. Other than the covenant name, Yahweh, it's the most common word in the Old Testament for God. And the first use of the word in this verse worked fine. But since I knew my Hebrew grammar, I saw immediately that the second instance needed to be translated as plural. There it was, plain as day: *The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*

Needless to say, I didn't hear a word of the sermon. My mind was reeling.

How was it possible that I'd never seen that before? I'd read through the Bible seven or eight times. I'd been to seminary. I'd studied Hebrew. I'd taught for five years at a Bible college.

What did this do to my theology? I'd always thought—and had taught my students—that any other "gods" referenced in the Bible were just idols. As easy and comfortable as that explanation was, it didn't make sense here. The God of Israel isn't part of a group of idols. But I couldn't picture him running around with other real gods, either. This was the Bible, not Greek mythology. But there it was in black and white. The text had me by the throat, and I couldn't shake free.

I immediately set to work trying to find answers. I soon discovered that the ground I was exploring was a place where evangelicals had feared to tread. The explanations I found from evangelical scholars were disturbingly weak, mostly maintaining that the gods (*elohim*) in the verse were just men—Jewish elders—or that the verse was about the Trinity. I knew neither of those could be correct. Psalm 82 states that the gods were being condemned as corrupt in their administration of the nations of the earth. The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations, and God certainly wouldn't be railing against the rest of the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, for being corrupt. Frankly, the answers just weren't honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.

When I looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship, I discovered that other scholars had

churned out dozens of articles and books on Psalm 82 and Israelite religion. They'd left no stone unturned in ferreting out parallels between the psalm and its ideas and the literature of other civilizations of the biblical world—in some cases, matching the psalm's phrases word for word. Their research brought to light other biblical passages that echoed the content of Psalm 82. I came to realize that most of what I'd been taught about the unseen world in Bible college and seminary had been filtered by English translations or derived from sources like Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

That Sunday morning and its fallout forced a decision. My conscience wouldn't let me ignore my own Bible in order to retain the theology with which I was comfortable. Was my loyalty to the text or to Christian tradition? Did I really have to choose between the two? I wasn't sure, but I knew that what I was reading in Psalm 82, taken at face value, simply didn't fit the theological patterns I had always been taught. And yet there had to be answers. After all, the passages I had only now noticed had also been read by apostles like Paul—and by Jesus himself, for that matter. If I couldn't find help in finding those answers, I would just have to put the pieces together myself.

That journey has taken fifteen years, and it has led to this book. The path has not been easy. It came with risk and discomfort. Friends, pastors, and colleagues at times misunderstood my questions and my rebuttals of their proposed answers. Conversations didn't always end well. That sort of thing happens when you demand that creeds and traditions get in line behind the biblical text.

Clarity eventually prevailed. Psalm 82 became a focal point of my doctoral dissertation, which also examined the nature of Israelite monotheism and how the biblical writers really thought about the unseen spiritual realm. I wish I could say that I was just smart enough to figure things out on my own. But in reality, even though I believe I was providentially prepared for the academic task I faced, there were times in the process when the best description I can give is that I was *led* to answers.

I still believe in the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. I still embrace the deity of Christ. But if we're being honest when we affirm inspiration, then how we talk about those and other doctrines must take into account the biblical text.

What you'll read in this book won't overturn the important applecarts of Christian doctrine, but you'll come across plenty of mind grenades. Have no fear—it will be a fascinating, faith-building exercise. What you'll learn is that a theology of the unseen world that derives exclusively from the text understood through the lens of the ancient, premodern worldview of the authors informs *every* Bible doctrine in significant ways. If it sounds like I'm overpromising, just withhold judgment till you've read the rest of the book.

What you'll read in this book will change you. *You'll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again.* Hundreds of people who read the early drafts of this book over the past decade have told me so—and appreciated the experience deeply. I know they're right because I'm living that experience, too.

My goal is simple. When you open your Bible, I want you to be able to see it like ancient Israelites or first-century Jews saw it, to perceive and consider it as they would have. I want *their* supernatural worldview in *your* head.

You might find that experience uncomfortable in places. But it would be dishonest of us to claim that the biblical writers read and understood the text the way we do as modern people, or intended meanings that conform to theological systems created centuries after the text was written. *Our context is not their context.*

Seeing the Bible through the eyes of an ancient reader requires shedding the filters of our

traditions and presumptions. They processed life in supernatural terms. Today's Christian processes it by a mixture of creedal statements and modern rationalism. I want to help you recover the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers—the people who produced the Bible. Obtaining and retaining that ancient mind-set requires observing a few ground rules, which we'll examine in the next chapter.

Rules of Engagement

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN ANYTHING OLD AND WEIRD. I WAS GOOD at school, too. When I became a Christian in high school I felt like I’d been born for Bible study. I know—that level of interest in the Bible wasn’t normal for a teenager. It was a bit of an obsession. I spent hours studying the Bible, as well as theology books. I took commentaries to study hall.

Since there was no 12-step program for my addiction, I went to Bible college to feed it. After that it was off to seminary. I wanted to be a biblical studies professor, so the next step was graduate school, where I finally focused on the Hebrew Bible and lots of dead ancient languages. I’d found biblical *nerdvana*, at least until that Sunday morning when I saw Psalm 82 without English camouflage.

Looking back, I can explain all my study, education, and learning before and after my Psalm 82 moment using two metaphors: a filter and a mosaic.

FILTERING THE TEXT

Filters are used to eliminate things in order to achieve a desired result. When we use them in cooking, the unwanted elements are dredged, strained, and discarded. When used in our cars, they prevent particles from interfering with performance. When we use them in email, they weed out what (or whom) we don’t want to read. What’s left is what we use—what contributes to our meal, our engine, or our sanity.

Most of my education was conducted in this way—using filters. It was no sinister plot. It was just what it was. The content I learned was filtered through certain presumptions and traditions that ordered the material for me, that put it into a system that made sense to my modern mind. Verses that didn’t quite work with my tradition were “problem passages” that were either filtered out or consigned to the periphery of unimportance.

I understand that a lot of well-meaning Bible students, pastors, and professors don’t look at how they approach the Bible that way. I know I didn’t. But it’s what happens. We view the Bible through the lens of what we know and what’s familiar. Psalm 82 broke my filter. More importantly, it alerted me to the fact that I’d been using one. Our traditions, however honorable, are not intrinsic to the Bible. They are systems we invent to organize the Bible. They are artificial. They are *filters*.

Once I’d been awakened to this, it struck me as faithless to use a filter. But throwing away my filters cost me the systems with which I’d ordered Scripture and doctrine in my mind. I was left with lots of fragments. It didn’t feel like it at the time, but that was the best thing that could have happened.

THE MOSAIC

The facts of the Bible are just pieces—bits of scattered data. Our tendency is to impose order, and to do that we apply a filter. But we gain a perspective that is both broader and deeper if we allow ourselves to see the pieces in their own wider context. We need to see the mosaic created by the

pieces.

The Bible is really a theological and literary mosaic. The pattern in a mosaic often isn't clear up close. It may appear to be just a random assemblage of pieces. Only when you step back can you see the wondrous whole. Yes, the individual pieces are essential; without them there would be no mosaic. But the meaning of all the pieces is found in the *completed* mosaic. And a mosaic isn't imposed *on* the pieces; it derives *from* them.

I now view Psalm 82 not as a passage that shredded my filter but rather as an important piece of a larger, mesmerizing mosaic. Psalm 82 has at its core the unseen realm and its interaction with the human world. And that psalm isn't the only piece like that; there are lots of them. In fact, the intersection of our domain and the unseen world—which includes the triune God, but also a much more numerous cast—is at the heart of biblical theology.

My passion is to persuade you to remove your filter and begin to look at the pieces of Scripture as part of a mosaic so that this “big picture” can begin to take focus. If you do it, you'll find, as I did, that this approach leads you to the answers to questions like, “Why is *that* in the Bible?” and “How can I make sense of all this?” If you've spent serious time in Scripture, you know that there are many odd passages, curious phrases, troubling paradoxes, echoes of one event in another, connections within and between the testaments that can't be coincidental.

OBSTACLES AND PROTOCOLS

There are some serious obstacles to transitioning from seeing the Bible through filters to allowing all of its pieces to form a mosaic. I've experienced all of them.

1. We've been trained to think that the history of Christianity is the true context of the Bible

We talk a lot about interpreting the Bible in context, but Christian history is *not* the context of the biblical writers. The proper context for interpreting the Bible is not Augustine or any other church father. It is not the Catholic Church. It is not the rabbinic movements of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is not the Reformation or the Puritans. It is not evangelicalism in any of its flavors. *It is not the modern world at all, or any period of its history.*

The proper context for interpreting the Bible is the context of the biblical writers—the context that *produced* the Bible.¹ Every other context is alien to the biblical writers and, therefore, to the Bible. *Yet there is a pervasive tendency in the believing Church to filter the Bible through creeds, confessions, and denominational preferences.*

I'm not arguing that we should ignore our Christian forefathers. I'm simply saying that we should give their words and their thought the proper perspective and priority. Creeds serve a useful purpose. They distill important, albeit carefully selected, theological ideas. But they are not inspired. They are no substitute for the biblical text.

The biblical text was produced by men who lived in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean between the second millennium BC and the first century AD. To understand how biblical writers thought, we need to tap into the intellectual output of that world. A vast amount of that material is available to us, thanks to modern technology. As our understanding of the worldview of the biblical writers grows, so does our understanding of what they intended to say—and the mosaic of their

thinking takes shape in our minds.

2. *We've been desensitized to the vitality and theological importance of the unseen world*

Modern Christianity suffers from two serious shortcomings when it comes to the supernatural world.

First, many Christians claim to believe in the supernatural but think (and live) like skeptics. We find talk of the supernatural world uncomfortable. This is typical of denominations and evangelical congregations outside the charismatic movement—in other words, those from a background like the one I grew up in.

There are two basic reasons why noncharismatics tend to close the door on the supernatural world. One is their suspicion that charismatic practices are detached from sound exegesis of Scripture. As a biblical scholar, it's easy for me to agree with that suspicion—but over time it has widely degenerated into a closed-minded overreaction that is itself detached from the worldview of the biblical writers.

The other reason is less self-congratulatory. The believing church is bending under the weight of its own rationalism, a modern worldview that would be foreign to the biblical writers. Traditional Christian teaching has for centuries kept the unseen world at arm's length. We believe in the Godhead because there's no point to Christianity without it. The rest of the unseen world is handled with a whisper or a chuckle.

The second serious shortcoming is evident within the charismatic movement: the elevation of experience over Scripture. While that movement is predisposed to embrace the idea of an animate spiritual world, its conception of that world is framed largely by experience and an idiosyncratic reading of the book of Acts.

Those two shortcomings, while seemingly quite different, are actually born of the same fundamental, underlying problem: Modern Christianity's view of the unseen world isn't framed by the ancient worldview of the biblical writers. One segment wrongly consigns the invisible realm to the periphery of theological discussion. The other is so busy seeking some interaction with it that it has become unconcerned with its biblical moorings, resulting in a caricature.

I'm concerned about both shortcomings, but since this book derives from my own story, the problem of the Christian skeptic hits closer to home and is my greater concern.

If your background, like mine, is in the evangelical, noncharismatic branch of Protestantism, perhaps you consider yourself an exception to the patterns I've identified, or think that I've overstated the situation. But what would you think if a Christian friend confided to you that he believed he had been helped by a guardian angel, or that he had audibly heard a disembodied voice warning him of some danger? What if your friend claimed to have witnessed demonic possession, or was convinced that God had directed her life through a dream that included an appearance of Jesus?

Most of us noncharismatics would have to admit that our initial impulse would be to doubt. But we actually have a less transparent reflex. We would nod our head and listen politely to our friend's fervent story, but the whole time we would be seeking other possible explanations. That's because our modern inclination is to insist on evidence. Since we live in a scientific age, we are prone to think these kinds of experiences are actually emotional misinterpretations of the events—or, worse, something treatable with the right medication. And in any individual case, that might be so—but the truth is that our modern evangelical subculture has trained us to think that our theology *precludes* any

experience of the unseen world. Consequently, it isn't an important part of our theology.

My contention is that, if our theology really derives from the biblical text, *we must reconsider our selective supernaturalism and recover a biblical theology of the unseen world*. This is not to suggest that the best interpretation of a passage is always the most supernatural one. But the biblical writers and those to whom they wrote were predisposed to supernaturalism. To ignore that outlook or marginalize it will produce Bible interpretation that reflects *our* mind-set more than that of the biblical writers.

3. We assume that a lot of things in the Bible are too odd or peripheral to matter

Sometime after we moved to Wisconsin for my doctoral work, my wife and I found a church that felt as if it might become our new church home. The pastor had a degree from a well-known seminary. His first two sermons from 1 Peter were filled with solid exposition. I was excited about the prospects. By our third visit, he had reached [1 Peter 3:14–22](#) in his sermon series, a very odd passage that's also one of my favorites. What happened next is etched on my memory. The pastor took the pulpit and announced with complete sincerity, "We're going to skip this section of 1 Peter since it's just too strange." We didn't visit again.

I've seen this sort of evasion more than once. Usually it's not as dramatic. Pastors don't typically tell their people to skip part of the Bible. The more common strategy for "handling" strange passages is more subtle: Strip the bizarre passage of anything that makes it bizarre. The goal is to provide the most ordinary, comfortable interpretation possible.

This strategy is ironic to say the least. Why is it that Christians who would strenuously defend a belief in God or the virgin birth against charges that they are unscientific or irrational don't hesitate to call out academic SWAT teams to explain away "weird" biblical passages? The core doctrines of the faith are themselves neither ordinary nor a comfortable fit with empirical rationalism.

The odds are very high that you've never heard that Psalm 82 plays a pivotal role in biblical theology (including New Testament theology). I've been a Christian for over thirty years and I've never heard a sermon on it. There are many other passages whose content is curious or "doesn't make sense" and so are abandoned or glossed over. Here's a sampling of them:

- [Gen 1:26](#)
- [Gen 3:5, 22](#)
- [Gen 6:1–4](#)
- Gen 10–11
- [Gen 15:1](#)
- [Gen 48:15–16](#)
- [Exod 3:1–14](#)
- [Exod 23:20–23](#)
- [Num 13:32–33](#)
- [Deut 32:8–9²](#)
- [Deut 32:17](#)
- Judg 6
- 1 Sam 3

- [1 Sam 23:1–14](#)
- [1 Kgs 22:1–23](#)
- [2 Kgs 5:17–19](#)
- Job 1–2
- Pss 82, 68, 89
- [Isa 14:12–15](#)
- [Ezek 28:11–19](#)
- Dan 7
- [Matt 16:13–23](#)
- [John 1:1–14](#)
- [John 10:34–35](#)
- [Rom 8:18–24](#)
- [Rom 15:24, 28](#)
- [1 Cor 2:6–13](#)
- [1 Cor 5:4–5](#)
- [1 Cor 6:3](#)
- [1 Cor 10:18–22](#)
- [Gal 3:19](#)
- [Eph 6:10–12](#)
- Heb 1–2
- [1 Pet 3:18–22](#)
- [2 Pet 1:3–4](#)
- [2 Pet 2:4–5](#)
- [Jude 5–7](#)
- [Rev 2:26–28](#)
- [Rev 3:21](#)

Don't consider that a mere catalog. The list is deliberate, and all of those passages will be examined in this book. All are conceptually interconnected, and all help illuminate the more commonly studied passages—those that *do* “make sense.” Look them up for a glimpse of what we'll be talking about.

How are we supposed to understand the identity of the “sons of God” in [Genesis 6:1–4](#)? Why did Jesus angrily rebuke Peter by saying “Get behind me, Satan”? Why does Paul tell the Corinthian church to stop arguing because they would someday “rule over angels”? There are lots of explanations offered by pastors and teachers of the Bible for these and other strange passages, but most are offered without consideration of how that explanation works with the rest of the Bible, with passages strange or not-so-strange.

In this book, I'll be offering my take on many “strange passages.” Other scholars have done the same. But if mine are different, it's because they grow out of the perspective of the mosaic. They don't exist in isolation from other passages. They have explanatory power in more than one place.

My point is not to suggest that we can have absolute certainty in interpretation everywhere in the Bible. No one, including the present writer, is always right about what every passage means. I have a firm grasp of my own lack of omniscience. (So does my wife, for the record.) Rather, my contention

in this book is that *if it's weird, it's important*. Every passage plays a coherent role in the mosaic whole.

I've said that the mosaic of biblical theology gives coherence to the pieces of the Bible. But the Bible is a long, detailed work. One of the hardest parts about writing this book was deciding what to reserve for another book—how to be comprehensive without being exhaustive. I decided to cheat.

The present book is the culmination of years of my time spent reading and studying the biblical text and exploring the insights of other scholars. I've accumulated thousands of books and scholarly journal articles that relate in some way to the ancient biblical worldview that produces the mosaic. I've read nearly all of them in part or whole. My bibliography is nearly as long as this book. I mention this to make it clear that the ideas you'll read here are not contrived. All of them have survived what scholars call peer review. My main contribution is *synthesis* of the ideas and articulating a biblical theology not derived from tradition but rather framed exclusively in the context of the Bible's own ancient worldview.

The present book is academic in tone, but it's not necessarily a book for scholars. You don't need to have gone to seminary or earned an advanced degree to follow along. I've tried to reserve technical discussion to a companion website to this book that will provide fuller discussion on certain topics, additional bibliography, and “nuts and bolts” data from the original languages for those who desire that.³

For those for whom this book may feel too dense, I've written a less-detailed version entitled *Supernatural*. It covers the core concepts in this book with an orientation toward practical application of the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers—toward how the biblical mosaic presented here should change our spiritual lives and outlook.

The subtitle of this book (“Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible”) captures the struggle of being a modern person with a believing heart trying to think like a premodern biblical writer. If you can feel even a little of that conflict, you're where I've been for a very long time. And I'm still on that journey. Somewhere along the way, I came to believe that I didn't need protection from my Bible. If you believe that too, you're good to go.

PART 2

THE HOUSEHOLDS OF GOD

God's Entourage

CHILDREN OFTEN ASK, “WHAT WAS THERE BEFORE GOD MADE THE WORLD?” The answer most adults would give is that *God* was there. That’s true, but incomplete. God had company. And I’m not talking about the other members of the Trinity.

GOD’S FAMILY

The biblical answer is that the heavenly host was with God before creation. In fact, they witnessed it. What God says to Job in [Job 38:4–7](#) is clear on that point:

- ⁴ “Where were you at my laying the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you possess understanding.
- ⁵ Who determined its measurement? Yes, you do know.
Or who stretched the measuring line upon it?
- ⁶ On what were its bases sunk?
Or who laid its cornerstone,
- ⁷ when the morning stars were singing together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

When God laid the foundations of the earth, the “sons of God” were there, shouting for joy. But who are the sons of God? Obviously, they aren’t humans. This is *before* the creation of the world. We might think of them as angels, but that wouldn’t be quite correct.

The unseen world has a hierarchy, something reflected in such terms as *archangel* versus *angel*. That hierarchy is sometimes difficult for us to discern in the Old Testament, since we aren’t accustomed to viewing the unseen world like a dynastic household (more on that following), as an Israelite would have processed certain terms used to describe the hierarchy.¹ In the ancient Semitic world, *sons of God* (Hebrew: *beney elohim*) is a phrase used to identify divine beings with higher-level responsibilities or jurisdictions. The term *angel* (Hebrew: *mal’ak*) describes an important but still lesser task: delivering messages.²

In Job 38, the sons of God are referred to as “morning stars.” That same description is found outside the Bible in ancient texts from the biblical world. Ancient people thought the stars were living entities.³ Their reasoning was simple: Many stars moved. That was a sign of life to the ancient mind. Stars were the shining glory of living beings.

The stars also inhabited the divine realm—literally, in the sense that they existed off the earth. The ancients believed that divine beings lived far away from humans, in remote places where human habitation wasn’t possible. The most remote place of all was the sky, the heavens.

Morning stars are the stars one sees over the horizon just before the sun appears in the morning. They signal new life—a new day. The label works. It conveys the right thought. The original morning stars, the sons of God, saw the beginning of life as we know it—the creation of earth.

Right from the start, then, God has company—other divine beings, the sons of God. Most discussions of what’s around before creation omit the members of the heavenly host. That’s unfortunate, because God and the sons of God, the divine family, are the first pieces of the mosaic.

We’ve barely made it to creation so far, and already we’ve uncovered some important truths from Scripture that have the potential to affect our theology in simple but profound ways. Their importance, if it isn’t clear yet, will become apparent soon.

First, we learned that the sons of God are divine, not human. The sons of God witnessed creation long before there were people. They are intelligent nonhuman beings. The reference to the sons of God as stars also makes it clear that they are divine. While the language is metaphorical, it is also more than metaphorical. In the next chapter we’ll see other passages that tell us that the sons of God are real, divine entities created by Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Second, the label “sons” deserves attention. It’s a family term, and that’s neither coincidental nor inconsequential. God has an unseen family—in fact, it’s his original family. The logic is the same as that behind Paul’s words in Acts at Mars Hill (the Areopagus) that all humans are indeed God’s offspring ([Acts 17:28](#)). God has created a host of nonhuman divine beings whose domain is (to human eyes) an unseen realm. And because he created them, he claims them as his sons, in the same way you claim your children as your sons and daughters because you played a part in their creation.

While it’s clear that the sons of God were with God before creation, there’s a lot about them that isn’t clear. They’re divine, but what does that really mean? How should we think of them in relation to God?

GOD’S HOUSEHOLD

The rulers of ancient Egypt were called pharaohs. In the language of ancient Egypt, the title was actually two words, *per a-a*, which meant “great house(hold).” The household concept for the ruling families of ancient Egypt was that of a dynastic bureaucracy. Pharaohs typically had large, extended families. They frequently appointed family members to key positions of authority in their administration. The elite staffing of the king’s governing bureaucracy typically came from Pharaoh’s household. They were administrators, not lowly messengers.

This concept and structure was well known throughout the ancient world. It spoke of layered authority: a high king, elite administrators who were often related to the king, and low-level personnel who served the higher levels of authority. Everyone in the system was part of the government, but authority and status were tiered.

Several Old Testament passages describe this administrative structure existing in the heavenly realm, as well. Psalm 82 is perhaps the clearest—and perhaps the most startling. As I related in the first chapter, it’s the passage that opened my own eyes. The psalm refers to Yahweh’s administration as a council.⁴ The first verse reads:

God (*elohim*) stands in the divine assembly;
he administers judgment in the midst of the gods (*elohim*).

You no doubt noticed that, as I pointed out in chapter one, the word *elohim* occurs twice in this verse. You also probably recognize *elohim* as one of God’s names, despite the fact that the form of the word is *plural*. In English we make words plural by adding *-s* or *-es* or *-ies* (*rats*, *horses*,

stories). In Hebrew, plurals of masculine nouns end with *-im*.

While the word *elohim* is plural in form, its *meaning* can be either plural or singular. Most often (over 2,000 times) in the Hebrew Bible it is singular, referring to the God of Israel.

We have words like this in English. For example, the word *sheep* can be either singular or plural. When we see *sheep* by itself, we don't know if we should think of one sheep or a flock of sheep. If we put *sheep* into a sentence ("The sheep is lost"), we know that only one sheep is meant since the verb *is* requires a singular subject. Likewise, "The sheep are lost" informs us that the status of more than one sheep is being discussed. Grammar guides us. It's the same with Hebrew.

[Psalm 82:1](#) is especially interesting since *elohim* occurs twice in that single verse. In [Psalm 82:1](#), the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verbal form ("stands"). The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it ("in the midst of") requires more than one. You can't be "in the *midst* of" *one*. The preposition calls for a group—as does the earlier noun, *assembly*. The meaning of the verse is inescapable: The singular *elohim* of Israel presides over an assembly of *elohim*.

A quick read of Psalm 82 informs us that God has called this council meeting to judge the *elohim* for corrupt rule of the nations. Verse [6](#) of the psalm declares that these *elohim* are sons of God. God says to them:

I have said, "You are gods [*elohim*],
and sons of the Most High [*beney elyon*], all of you.

To a biblical writer, the Most High (*elyon*) was the God of Israel. The Old Testament refers to him as Most High in several places (e.g., [Gen 14:18–22](#); [Num 24:16](#); [Pss 7:17](#); [18:13](#); [47:2](#)). The sons of God/the Most High here are clearly called *elohim*, as the pronoun "you" in verse [6](#) is a plural form in the Hebrew.

The text is not clear whether all of the *elohim* are under judgment or just some. The idea of *elohim* ruling the nations under God's authority is a biblical concept that is described in other passages we'll explore later. For now, it's sufficient that you see clearly that the sons of God are divine beings under the authority of the God of Israel.⁵

You see why the psalm threw me for a loop. The first verse has God presiding over an assembly of gods. Doesn't that sound like a pantheon—something we associate with polytheism and mythology? For that very reason, many English translations obscure the Hebrew in this verse. For example, the NASB translates it as: "God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers."

There's no need to camouflage what the Hebrew text says. People shouldn't be protected from the Bible. The biblical writers weren't polytheists. But since Psalm 82 generates questions and controversy, we need to spend some time on what it teaches and what it doesn't teach, along with other passages that inform us about the divine council. We'll do just that in the next chapter.

God Alone

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT PSALM 82 CAN ROCK YOUR BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW. Once I saw what it was actually saying, I was convinced that I needed to look at the Bible through ancient eyes, not my traditions. I had to navigate the questions that are probably floating around in your own head and heart now that you've read—really read—that passage.

First and foremost, you should be aware of some of the ways the clear meaning of Psalm 82 is distorted by interpreters and why it *isn't* teaching polytheism.

DIVINE BEINGS ARE NOT HUMAN

Many Christians who object to the plain meaning of the Hebrew text of Psalm 82 assert that this psalm is actually describing God the Father speaking to the other members of the Trinity. This view results in heresy. I'm confident you can see why—the psalm has God judging the other *elohim* for corruption (vv. 2–4). The corrupt *elohim* are sentenced to die like humans (v. 7). These observations alone should make any Christian who cares about the doctrine of God abandon this idea. It has other flaws. The end of the psalm makes it evident that the *elohim* being chastised were given some sort of authority over the nations of the earth, a task at which they failed. This doesn't fit the Trinity.

Other Christians who see the problems with this first idea try to argue that the sons of God are human beings—Jews to be specific. Some Jewish readers (who obviously would not be Trinitarian) also favor this view.

This “human view” is as flawed as the Trinitarian view.¹ At no point in the Old Testament does the Scripture teach that Jews or Jewish leaders were put in authority over the other nations. The opposite is true—they were to be separate from other nations. The covenant with Abraham presupposed this separation: If Israel was wholly devoted to Yahweh, other nations would be blessed ([Gen 12:1–3](#)). Humans are also not by nature disembodied. The word *elohim* is a “place of residence” term. Our home is the world of embodiment; *elohim* by nature inhabit the spiritual world.

The real problem with the human view, though, is that it cannot be reconciled with other references in the Hebrew Old Testament that refer to a divine council of *elohim*.

[Psalm 89:5–7](#) (Hebrew: vv. 6–8) explicitly contradicts the notion of a divine council in which the *elohim* are humans.

⁵ And so the heavens will praise your wonderful deed, O Yahweh,
even your faithfulness, in the assembly of the holy ones.

⁶ For who in the sky is equal to Yahweh?
Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God,

⁷ a God feared greatly in the council of the holy ones,
and awesome above all surrounding him?

God's divine council is an assembly *in the heavens*, not on earth. The language is unmistakable. This

is precisely what we'd expect if we understand the *elohim* to be divine beings. It is utter nonsense if we think of them as humans. There is no reference in Scripture to a council of human beings serving Yahweh in the skies (Jews or otherwise).

What Psalms 82 and 89 describe is completely consistent with what we saw earlier in [Job 38:7](#)—a group of heavenly sons of God. It also accords perfectly with other references to the sons of God as plural *elohim*:

The sons of God came to present themselves before Yahweh. ([Job 1:6](#); [2:1](#))

¹ Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

² Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name ([Psa 29:1–2](#)).

Do these references describe a group of Jewish leaders, among whom (in the passage from Job) Yahweh's great adversary appears, leading to Job's suffering? The conclusion is obvious.

PLURAL ELOHIM DOES NOT MEAN POLYTHEISM

Many scholars believe that Psalm 82 and other passages demonstrate that the religion of ancient Israel began as a polytheistic system and then evolved into monotheism. I reject that idea, along with any other explanations that seek to hide the plain reading of the text. In all such cases, the thinking is misguided.² The problem is rooted in a mistaken notion of what exactly the word *elohim* means.

Since *elohim* is so often translated *God*, we look at the Hebrew word the same way we look at capitalized G-o-d. When we see the word *God*, we instinctively think of a divine being with a unique set of attributes—omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty, and so on. But this is not how a biblical writer thought about the term. Biblical authors did not assign a specific set of attributes to the word *elohim*. That is evident when we observe how they used the word.

The biblical writers refer to a half-dozen different entities with the word *elohim*. By any religious accounting, the attributes of those entities are *not* equal.

- Yahweh, the God of Israel (thousands of times—e.g., [Gen 2:4–5](#); [Deut 4:35](#))
- The members of Yahweh's council ([Psa 82:1, 6](#))
- Gods and goddesses of other nations ([Judg 11:24](#); [1 Kgs 11:33](#))
- Demons (Hebrew: *shedim*—[Deut 32:17](#))³
- The deceased Samuel ([1 Sam 28:13](#))
- Angels or the Angel of Yahweh⁴ ([Gen 35:7](#))

The importance of this list can be summarized with one question: Would any Israelite, especially a biblical writer, really believe that the deceased human dead and demons are on the same level as Yahweh? No. The usage of the term *elohim* by biblical writers tells us very clearly that the term is not about a set of attributes. Even though when we see “G-o-d” we think of a unique set of attributes, when a biblical writer wrote *elohim*, he wasn't thinking that way. If he were, he'd never have used the term *elohim* to describe anything but Yahweh.

Consequently, there is no warrant for concluding that plural *elohim* produces a pantheon of interchangeable deities. There is no basis for concluding that the biblical writers would have viewed

Yahweh as no better than another *elohim*. A biblical writer would not have presumed that Yahweh could be defeated on any given day by another *elohim*, or that another *elohim* (why not any of them?) had the same set of attributes. *That* is polytheistic thinking. It is not the biblical picture.

We can be confident of this conclusion by once again observing what the biblical writers say about Yahweh—and never say about another *elohim*. The biblical writers speak of Yahweh in ways that telegraph their belief in his uniqueness and incomparability:

“Who is like you among the gods [*elim*], Yahweh?” (Exod 15:11)

“ ‘What god [*eI*] is there in the heaven or on the earth who can do according to your works and according to your mighty deeds?’ ” (Deut 3:24)

“O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no god [*elohim*] like you in the heavens above or on the earth beneath” (1 Kgs 8:23).

For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth.

You are highly exalted above all gods [*elohim*] (Psalm 97:9).

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh. Yahweh is all-powerful (Jer 32:17, 27; Pss 72:18; 115:3), the sovereign king over the other *elohim* (Psa 95:3; Dan 4:35; 1 Kgs 22:19), the creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa 148:1–5; Neh 9:6; cf. Job 38:7; Deut 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas 1:17)⁵ and the lone *elohim* who deserves worship from the other *elohim* (Psa 29:1). In fact, Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique—there is only *one* Yahweh (“You alone are Yahweh”).

The biblical use of *elohim* is not hard to understand once we know that it isn’t about attributes. *What all the figures on the list have in common is that they are inhabitants of the spiritual world.* In that realm there is hierarchy. For example, Yahweh possesses superior attributes with respect to all *elohim*. But God’s attributes aren’t what makes him an *elohim*, since inferior beings are members of that same group. The Old Testament writers understood that Yahweh was an *elohim*—but no other *elohim* was Yahweh. He was species-unique among all residents of the spiritual world.

This is not to say that an *elohim* could not interact with the human world. The Bible makes it clear that divine beings can (and did) assume physical human form, and even corporeal flesh, for interaction with people, but that is not their normal estate. Spiritual beings are “spirits” (1 Kgs 22:19–22; John 4:24; Heb 1:14; Rev 1:4). In like manner, humans can be transported to the divine realm (e.g., Isa 6), but that is not our normal plane of existence. As I explained earlier in this chapter, the word *elohim* is a “place of residence” term. It has nothing to do with a specific set of attributes.

Let’s take a look at some other questions Psalm 82 raises.

WHAT DOES GOD NEED WITH A COUNCIL?

This is an obvious question. Its answer is just as obvious: God doesn’t *need* a council. But it’s scripturally clear that he has one. The question is actually similar to another one: *What does God need with people?* The answer is the same: God doesn’t *need* people. But he uses them. God is not dependent on humans for his plans. God doesn’t need us for evangelism. He could save all the people he wanted to by merely thinking about it. God could terminate evil in the blink of an eye and bring

human history to the end he desires at any moment. But he doesn't. Instead, he works his plan for all things on earth by using human beings. He's also not incomplete without our worship, but he desires it.

I'm not saying that the question of whether God needs a council is pointless. I'm saying that it's no argument against the existence of a divine council.

ARE THE ELOHIM REAL?

Those who want to avoid the clarity of Psalm 82 argue that the gods are only idols. As such, they aren't real. This argument is flatly contradicted by Scripture. It's also illogical and shows a misunderstanding of the rationale of idolatry.

With respect to Scripture, one need look no further than [Deuteronomy 32:17](#).

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons [*shedim*], not God [*eloah*], to gods [*elohim*] whom they had not known.

The verse explicitly calls the *elohim* that the Israelites perversely worshiped demons (*shedim*). This rarely used term ([Deut 32:17](#); [Psa 106:37](#)) comes from the Akkadian *shedu*.⁶ In the ancient Near East, the term *shedu* was neutral; it could speak of a good or malevolent spirit being. These Akkadian figures were often cast as guardians or protective entities, though the term was also used to describe the life force of a person.⁷ In the context of [Deuteronomy 32:17](#), *shedim* were *elohim*—spirit beings guarding foreign territory—who must not be worshiped.⁸ Israel was supposed to worship her own God (here, *eloah*; cf. [Deut 29:25](#)).⁹ One cannot deny the reality of the *elohim/shedim* in [Deuteronomy 32:17](#) without denying the reality of demons.¹⁰

Scholars disagree over what kind of entity the *shedim* were. But whatever the correct understanding of *shedim* might be, they are not pieces of wood or stone.

Scholars of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians know that, in the apostle's warning to not fellowship with demons ([1 Cor 10:20](#)), Paul's comments follow the history of the Israelites described in Deuteronomy 32.¹¹ He warns believers against fellowship with demons on the basis of Israel's failure in worshiping other gods. Paul uses the word *daimonion*, one of the words used frequently in the New Testament for evil spiritual beings, to translate *shedim* in [Deuteronomy 32:17](#). Paul knew his Hebrew Bible and didn't deny the reality of the *shedim*, who are *elohim*.

“NO GODS BESIDES ME”?

Another misguided strategy is to argue that statements in the Old Testament that have God saying “there is none besides me” mean that no other *elohim* exist. This isn't the case. These phrases do not contradict Psalm 82 or others that, for example, say Yahweh is above all *elohim* or is the “God of gods [*elohim*].”

I've written a lot on this subject—it was a focus of my doctoral dissertation.¹² These “denial statements,” as they are called by scholars, do not assert that there are no other *elohim*. In fact, some of them are found in chapters where the reality of other *elohim* is affirmed. We've already seen that

[Deuteronomy 32:17](#) refers to *elohim* that Paul believed existed. [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) also refers to the sons of God. [Deuteronomy 4:19–20](#) is a parallel to that passage, and yet [Deuteronomy 4:35](#) says there is no god besides Yahweh. Is Scripture filled with contradictions?

No. These “denial statements” do not deny that other *elohim* exist. Rather, they deny that any *elohim* compares to Yahweh. They are statements of incomparability. This point is easily illustrated by noticing where else the same denial language shows up in the Bible. [Isaiah 47:8](#) and [Zephaniah 2:15](#) have, respectively, Babylon and Nineveh saying “there is none besides me.” Are we to believe that the point of the phrase is to declare that no other cities *exist* except Babylon or Nineveh? That would be absurd. The point of the statement is that Babylon and Nineveh considered themselves *incomparable*, as though no other city could measure up to them. This is precisely the point when these same phrases are used of other gods—they cannot measure up to Yahweh. The Bible does not contradict itself on this point. Those who want to argue that the other *elohim* do not exist are at odds with the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers.

EXAMINING THE LOGIC

The denial that other *elohim* exist insults the sincerity of biblical writers and the glory of God. How is it coherent to say that verses extolling the superiority of Yahweh above all *elohim* ([Psa 97:9](#)) are really telling us Yahweh is greater than beings that don’t exist? Where is God’s glory in passages calling other *elim* to worship Yahweh ([Psa 29:1–2](#)) when the writers don’t believe those beings are real? Were the writers inspired to lie or hoodwink us? To give us theological gibberish?

To my ear, it mocks God to say, “You’re greater than something that doesn’t exist.” So is my dog. Saying, “Among the beings that we all know don’t exist there is none like Yahweh” is tantamount to comparing Yahweh with Spiderman or Spongebob Squarepants. This reduces praise to a snicker. Why would the Holy Spirit inspire such nonsense?

MISUNDERSTANDING IDOLATRY

The biblical prophets love to make fun of idol making. It seems so stupid to carve an idol from wood or stone or make one from clay and then worship it. But ancient people did not believe that their gods were actually images of stone or wood. We misread the biblical writers if we think that.

What ancient idol worshippers believed was that the objects they made were *inhabited* by their gods. This is why they performed ceremonies to “open the mouth” of the statue.¹³ The mouth (and nostrils) had to be ritually opened for the spirit of the deity to move in and occupy, a notion inspired by the idea that one needs to breathe to live. The idol first had to be animated with the very real spiritual presence of the deity. Once that was done, the entity was localized for worship and bargaining.

This is easily proven from ancient texts. There are accounts, for example, of idols being destroyed. There is no sense of fear in those accounts that the god was dead.¹⁴ Rather, there was only a need to make another idol.

Paul’s warning in [1 Corinthians 10:18–22](#), alluded to previously, reflects this thinking. Earlier in the letter, he told the Corinthians that an idol had no power and was, in and of itself, nothing ([1 Cor](#)

8:4). While Gentiles had other lords and gods, for believers there was only one true God. But in chapter 10, he clarifies that he also knows that sacrifices to idols are actually sacrifices to demons—evil members of the spiritual world.

WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

Readers of Psalm 82 often raise a specific question about Jesus. If there are other divine sons of God, what do we make of the description of Jesus as the “only begotten” son of God ([John 1:14, 18](#); [3:16, 18](#); [1 John 4:9](#))? How could Jesus be the *only* divine son when there were others?

“Only begotten” is an unfortunately confusing translation, especially to modern ears. Not only does the translation “only begotten” seem to contradict the obvious statements in the Old Testament about other sons of God, it implies that there was a time when the Son did not exist—that he had a beginning.

The Greek word translated by this phrase is *monogenes*. It doesn’t mean “only begotten” in some sort of “birthing” sense. The confusion extends from an old misunderstanding of the root of the Greek word. For years *monogenes* was thought to have derived from two Greek terms, *monos* (“only”) and *gennao* (“to beget, bear”). Greek scholars later discovered that the second part of the word *monogenes* does not come from the Greek verb *gennao*, but rather from the noun *genos* (“class, kind”). The term literally means “one of a kind” or “unique” without connotation of created origin. Consequently, since Jesus is indeed identified with Yahweh and is therefore, with Yahweh, unique among the *elohim* that serve God, the term *monogenes* does not contradict the Old Testament language.

The validity of this understanding is borne out by the New Testament itself. In [Hebrews 11:17](#), Isaac is called Abraham’s *monogenes*. If you know your Old Testament you know that Isaac was *not* the “only begotten” son of Abraham. Abraham had earlier fathered Ishmael (cf. [Gen 16:15](#); [21:3](#)). The term must mean that Isaac was Abraham’s *unique* son, for he was the son of the covenant promises. Isaac’s genealogical line would be the one through which Messiah would come. Just as Yahweh is an *elohim*, and no other *elohim* are Yahweh, so Jesus is the unique Son, and no other sons of God are like him.

We’ve already encountered a lot of material that needs careful thought—and we’ve barely begun this epic story. The sons of God watched as God laid the foundations of the earth ([Job 38:7](#)). We’re about to see, as they did long ago, exactly what their Maker was up to.

As in Heaven, So on Earth

THE SAYING “AS IN HEAVEN, SO ON EARTH” IS FAMILIAR TO CHRISTIANS. IT’S part of the Lord’s Prayer ([Matt 6:9–15](#)). In that prayer, we learn what the saying means: “your kingdom come, your will be done” ([6:10](#)). The kingdom of God is the rule of God. God desires to rule over *all* he has created: the invisible spiritual realm and the visible earthly realm. He will have his way in both domains.

In the next three chapters, I’ll explain how the ancient biblical writers originally conceived this kingship from the beginning of creation. What we’ll discover amounts to the real focus of the Bible—its theological center, if you will. I’d put it this way:

The story of the Bible is about God’s will for, and rule of, the realms he has created, visible and invisible, through the imagers he has created, human and nonhuman. This divine agenda is played out in both realms, in deliberate tandem.

The term *imager* may be unfamiliar. Later in this chapter I’ll explain what it means to be one.

The part of the story we know most about is the one we’re in—the visible, terrestrial world. Naturally, that’s the one that gets the most attention from pastors and theologians. The invisible realm is regularly overlooked, or talked about only in relation to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The two realms are not mutually exclusive or peripheral to each other; they are integrally connected—by design. That point is telegraphed very early in the biblical story.

CREATOR OR CREATORS?

The “as in heaven, so on Earth” idea is much older than the Lord’s prayer. It begins in Genesis. The first chapter of Genesis is easily misinterpreted by one not yet acquainted with God’s original family and household, the divine council. Note carefully the emphasis in bold I’ve placed in [Genesis 1:26–28](#):

²⁶ And God said, “Let **us** make humankind in **our** image and according to **our** likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of heaven, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every moving thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁷ So God created humankind in **his** image, in the likeness of God **he** created him, male and female **he** created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, and over every animal that moves upon the earth.”

Many Bible readers note the *plural* pronouns (*us*; *our*) with curiosity. They might suggest that the plurals refer to the Trinity, but technical research in Hebrew grammar and exegesis has shown that the Trinity is not a coherent explanation.¹ The solution is much more straightforward, one that an ancient Israelite would have readily discerned. What we have is a single person (God) addressing a group—the members of his divine council.

It’s like me going into a room of friends and saying, “Hey, let’s go get some pizza!” I’m the one

speaking. A group is hearing what I say. Similarly, God comes to the divine council with an exciting announcement: “Let’s create humankind!”

But if God is speaking to his divine council here, does that suggest that humankind was created by more than one *elohim*? Was the creation of humankind a group project? Not at all. Back to my pizza illustration: If I am the one paying for the pizza—making the plan happen after announcing it—then I retain both the inspiration and the initiative for the entire project. That’s how [Genesis 1:26](#) works.

[Genesis 1:27](#) tells us clearly that only God himself does the creating. In the Hebrew, all the verbs of creation in the passage are singular in form: “So God created humankind in his image, in the likeness of God he created him.” The other members of the council do not participate in the creation of humankind. They watch, just as they did when God laid the foundations of the earth ([Job 38:7](#)).

You might wonder at this point why the language changes from plural in verse 26 (“Let *us* make humankind in *our* image and according to *our* likeness”) to singular in verse 27 (“So God created humankind in *his* image, in the likeness of God he created him”). Does the Bible contradict itself here? No. But understanding the switch requires understanding what the “image” language means.

IMAGE OR IMAGER?

Identifying the nature of the divine image has preoccupied students and pastors for a long time. Chances are you’ve heard a sermon or two on the topic. I’m willing to bet that what you’ve heard is that the image of God is similar to something in this list:

- Intelligence
- Reasoning ability
- Emotions
- The ability to commune with God
- Self-awareness (sentience)
- Language/communication ability
- The presence of a soul or spirit (or both)
- The conscience
- Free will

All those things sound like possibilities, but they’re not. The image of God means none of those things. If it did, then Bible-believers ought to abandon the idea of the sanctity of human life in the womb. That assertion may jar you, but it’s quite evident once you really consider that list in light of how Scripture talks about the image of God.

Genesis teaches us several things about the image of God—what I call “divine image bearing.” All of what we learn from the text must be accounted for in any discussion of what the image means.

1. Both men and women are equally included.
2. Divine image bearing is what makes humankind distinct from the rest of *earthly* creation (i.e., plants and animals). The text of [Genesis 1:26](#) does *not* inform us that divine image bearing makes us distinct from heavenly beings, those sons of God who were already in existence at the time of creation. The plurals in [Genesis 1:26](#) mean that, in some way, we share something with them when it comes to bearing God’s image.

3. There is something about the image that makes humankind “like” God in some way.
4. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. You’re either created as God’s image bearer or you aren’t. One cannot speak of being *partly* or *potentially* bearing God’s image.

Among the list of proposed answers to what image bearing means are a number of *abilities* or *properties*: intelligence, reasoning ability, emotions, communing with God, self-awareness, language/communication ability, and free will. The problem with defining the image by any of these qualities is that, on one hand, nonhuman beings like animals possess *some* of these abilities, although not to the same extent as humans. If one animal anywhere, at any time, learned anything contrary to instinct, or communicated intelligently (to us or within species), or displayed an emotional response (again to us or other creatures), those items must be ruled out as image bearing. We know certain animals have these abilities because of carefully conducted research in the field of animal cognition. Artificial intelligence is on the verge of similar breakthroughs. And if intelligent extraterrestrial life is ever discovered, that would also undermine such definitions.

Defining image bearing as *any* ability is a flawed approach. This brings me back to my pro-life assertion. The pro-life position is based on the proposition that human life (and so, personhood) begins at conception (the point when the female egg is fertilized by the male sperm). The single-celled zygote inside the woman’s womb, which pro-lifers believe to be a human person, is not self-aware; it has no intelligence, rational thought processes, or emotions; it cannot speak or communicate; it cannot commune with God or pray; and it cannot exercise its will or respond to the conscience. If you want to argue that those things are there *potentially*, then that means that you have only a potential person. That’s actually the pro-choice position. *Potential* personhood is not *actual* personhood. This thought process would mean that abortion is not killing until personhood is achieved, which nearly all pro-choicers would certainly consider to be after birth.

Even the soul idea fails the uniqueness and actuality tests. This notion derives from the traditional rendering of [Genesis 2:7](#) in the King James Version (“and the man became a living *soul*”). The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *nephesh*. According to the Bible, animals also possess the *nephesh*. For example, in [Genesis 1:20](#), when we read that God made swarms of “living creatures,” the Hebrew text underlying “creatures” is *nephesh*. [Genesis 1:30](#) tells us the “living *nephesh*” is in animals.

The term *nephesh* in these passages means *conscious life* or *animate life* (as opposed to something like plant life). Humans share a basic consciousness with certain animals, though the nature of that consciousness varies widely.

We also cannot appeal to a *spirit* being the meaning of image bearing. The word *nephesh* we just considered is used interchangeably with the Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*). Examples include [1 Samuel 1:15](#) and [Job 7:11](#). Both terms speak of an inner life where thinking, reason, and emotions occur, along with their use in activities like prayer and decision making. The point is that the Old Testament does not distinguish between soul and spirit.² All these qualities associated with spirit require cognitive function, and so cannot be relevant until after brain formation (and use) in the fetus.

So how do we understand divine image bearing in a way that does not stumble over these issues and yet aligns with the description in Genesis? Hebrew grammar is the key. The turning point is the meaning of the preposition *in* with respect to the phrase “*in* the image of God.” In English we use the

preposition *in* to denote many different ideas. That is, *in* doesn't always mean the same thing when we use that word. For example, if I say, "put the dishes *in* the sink," I am using the preposition to denote *location*. If I say, "I broke the mirror *in* pieces," I am using *in* to denote the *result* of some action. If I say, "I work *in* education," I am using the preposition to denote that I work *as* a teacher or principal, or in some other educational capacity.

This last example directs us to what the Hebrew preposition translated *in* means in [Genesis 1:26](#). Humankind was created *as* God's image. If we think of imaging as a verb or function, that translation makes sense. We are created to image God, to be his imagers. It is what we are by definition. The image is not an ability we have, but a status. We are God's representatives on earth. To *be* human is to image God.

This is why [Genesis 1:26–27](#) is followed by what theologians call the "dominion mandate" in verse [28](#). The verse informs us that God intends us to be him on this planet. We are to create more imagers ("be fruitful and multiply ... fill") in order to oversee the earth by stewarding its resources and harnessing them for the benefit of all human imagers ("subdue ... rule over").

GOD'S TWO FAMILY-HOUSEHOLD-COUNCILS

Understanding that we are God's imagers on earth helps to parse the plurals in [Genesis 1:26](#) and the change to singular language in the next verse. God alone created humankind to function as his administrators on earth. But he has also created the other *elohim* of the unseen realm. They are also like him. They carry out his will in that realm, acting as his representatives. They are his heavenly council in the unseen world. We are God's council and administration in this realm. Consequently, the plurals inform us that both God's families—the human and the nonhuman—share imaging status, though the realms are different. As in heaven, so on Earth.

This biblical theology sets the table for understanding other passages and concepts in both testaments. The logic of idolatry we talked about earlier takes on new irony. Humans after the fall will resort to making objects of wood and stone that they must ceremonially animate to draw the deity into the artifact. But from the beginning, God created his own imagers—humankind, male and female. His desire was to live among them, and for them to rule and reign with him.

After the fall that plan was not altered. Eventually, God would decide to tabernacle *within* humans, through his Spirit. Language describing believers as sons or children of God ([John 1:12](#); [1 John 3:1–3](#)), or as "adopted" into God's family ([Gal 4:5](#); [Eph 1:5](#)) is neither accidental nor pragmatic. *It reflects the original vision of Genesis*. And once we are glorified, the two council-families will be one—in a new Eden. We'll discover more about all those themes as we proceed.

This is what Eden was about ... as in heaven, so on Earth. The original intent becomes even clearer once we understand the ancient conception of Eden.

Gardens and Mountains

WE’VE LEARNED THAT THE OLD TESTAMENT DESCRIBES TWO HOUSEHOLD-FAMILIES of God, one human and the other nonhuman. Those two families were created as God’s representatives to serve him in different realms. In this chapter we’ll explore how descriptions of Eden reinforce these concepts.

We usually think of Eden as it’s described in [Genesis 2:8](#), the place the first humans called home: “Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.” But the description of Eden as the home of humankind deflects our attention away from Eden’s primary status.

Eden was *God’s* home on earth. It was his residence. And where the King lives, his council meets. As modern readers, we don’t see how that thinking is telegraphed in the biblical text. Ancient readers couldn’t miss it.

THE ANCIENT CONTEXT

Eden can only be properly understood in light of the worldview the biblical writers shared with other people of the ancient Near East. Like Israel, the people of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example, also believed in an unseen spiritual world that was governed by a divine council. The divine abodes of gods—the places they lived and where they met for governing the affairs of the human world—were portrayed in several ways. Two of the most common were gardens and mountains. Eden is described as both in the Old Testament.

Ancient people thought of their gods living in luxuriant gardens or mountains for simple reasons. It made sense that the gods would have the best lifestyle because, well, they’re *gods*. Cosmic celebrities can’t possibly live like we do.

The ancient Near East was primarily an agrarian culture where most people subsisted day-to-day, hand-to-mouth. The few who didn’t live that way were kings or priests—and thinking as the ancients did, those few had been chosen for that elevated status by the gods. The environment was hot and arid. Life depended on finding water and harnessing its power. That’s why the world’s first civilizations were founded along rivers (e.g., the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates). Surely the gods lived in a place where water was abundant, where life-sustaining vegetation and fruit grew everywhere, where an abundance of animals were nourished to fatness. The gods lived in places where there was no conceivable lack. Paradise.

Mountain peaks were the domain of gods because no humans lived there. Ancient times were not like modern times. People didn’t recreationally climb mountains. They had no equipment with which to get very far if they tried. Mountains were remote and forbidding—the perfect places for gods to get away from pesky humans. Mountain peaks touched the heavens, which was obviously the domain of the gods.

This sort of thinking in part explains why Egypt’s temples are carved and painted with the imagery of luscious gardens, or why pyramids and ziggurats were built. These structures were mountains made by human hands which served as gateways to the spiritual world, the realm of the

gods, in life or in death. They were metaphors in stone.

ANCIENT UGARIT

For our purposes, though, it is the less grandiose ancient civilization of Ugarit, a city-state in ancient Syria, just to the north of Israel, which is particularly relevant.¹

The site of Ugarit was discovered in 1928 and excavated in the decades that followed. One of the major finds was a library containing thousands of clay tablets, roughly 1400 of which were in an alphabetic language (now called Ugaritic) that was closer to biblical Hebrew than any other ancient language. The vocabulary and grammar are in many instances virtually identical.

Scholars have learned a lot from this library, about both Ugarit and the content of the Old Testament. The chief deity of Ugarit was El—one of the names that appear in the Old Testament for the God of Israel. El had a divine council whose members were “the sons of El,” and he had a coruler, Baal. Since El’s and Baal’s duties sometimes appeared to overlap, and since Ugarit was so geographically close to Israel, it was small wonder that Baal worship was such a problem in Israel. The discoveries at Ugarit put all of that Old Testament history in context.

El and Baal were, to say the least, markedly different in behavior from Yahweh of Israel. But the literature of Ugarit proved very illuminating in other respects, especially as to where El, Baal, and the Ugaritic divine council lived and held court. At Ugarit the divine council had three levels: the highest authority (El, who did most of his ruling through a coruling vizier, Baal), the “sons of El,” and messenger gods (*mal’akim*).

The council of El met on a mountain or lush garden. These were not different places. Rather, the same place was described in two different ways. The abode of El had an abundant water supply, as it was situated at the “source of the two rivers” in the “midst of the fountains of the double-deep.” The divine council met in a place called *Tsapanu*, the remote heights of the north (*tsapanu* means “north”).

Council meetings were held in “the tents of El” or El’s “tent shrine,” whence divine decrees were issued. At times Baal’s palace was in view, with its “paved bricks” that gave his house “the clearness of lapis lazuli.”

YAHWEH’S ABODE

All of this will sound familiar to someone who has read the Old Testament closely. The Hebrew Bible uses these same descriptions for the abode and throne room of Yahweh. And where Yahweh is, he is surrounded by his heavenly assembly, ready to conduct business (cf. Isa 6; [1 Kgs 22:13–28](#)). The Old Testament has a three-tiered council structure like that at Ugarit. Yahweh is at the top.² His family-household (“sons of God”) are next in hierarchy. The lowest level is reserved for *elohim* messengers—*mal’akim* (the word translated “angels”).

The Tabernacle tent structure and the Tent of Meeting, both of which are mentioned throughout the books of Exodus through Judges, are clear parallels to places where God dwells and hands down his decrees. Yahweh could also be found on mountains (Sinai or Zion). In [Psalm 48:1–2](#), Jerusalem, the city of God, is said to be located in the “heights of the north” (*tsaphon* in Hebrew).³ Mount Zion is the “mountain of assembly,” again located in the “heights of the north” ([Isa 14:13](#)). At Sinai, Moses

and others saw the seated God of Israel, under whose feet was a pavement “like sapphire tile work and like the very heavens for clearness” ([Exod 24:9–10](#)).

The garden of Eden, of course, is a lush, well-watered habitation ([Gen 2:5–14](#)). [Ezekiel 28:13](#) mentions the garden of Eden (“garden of God”), but then adds the description that the garden of God is “God’s holy mountain” ([Ezek 28:14](#)).⁴ We naturally think of God’s mountain as Mount Sinai or Mount Zion. When it comes to garden imagery, the latter is spoken of in Edenic terms. Like Eden, Mount Zion is also described as a watery habitation ([Isa 33:20–22](#); [Ezek 47:1–12](#); [Zech 14:8](#); [Joel 3:18](#)). Whether Sinai or Zion, the mountain of God is, in effect, his temple.⁵

IMPLICATIONS

An ancient Israelite would have thought of Eden as the dwelling of God and the place from which God and his council direct the affairs of humanity. The imagery is completely consistent with how Israel’s neighbors thought about their gods.⁶ But in biblical theology, there is additional messaging.

As we’ll see in the ensuing chapters, *the biblical version of the divine council at the divine abode includes a human presence*. The theological message is that the God of Israel created this place not just as his own domain, but because he desires to live among his people. Yahweh desires a kingdom rule on this new Earth that he has created, and that rule will be shared with humanity. Since the heavenly council is also where Yahweh is, both family-households should function together. Had the fall not occurred, humanity would have been glorified and made part of the council.

This is not speculation. In the last chapter we saw the beginning of the theological idea that humans are the children of God. It was God’s original intent to make them part of his family. The failure in Eden would alienate God from man, but God would make a way of salvation to bring believers back into that family ([John 1:12](#); [1 John 3:1–3](#)). We also saw that humanity’s presence showed that God’s original desire was for his human children to participate in his rule. Both of these theological threads wind through the Old Testament and create the context from which New Testament writers will talk about the kingdom and the glorification of believers. These are ideas we’ll return to in future chapters.

One more verse about Eden—one that will vault us into the next chapter: Eden is described in [Ezekiel 28:2](#) as the “seat of the gods.” The phrase should be familiar to modern readers. It speaks of governing authority (“county seat”; “Congressional seat”). Ezekiel’s words draw attention to Eden as a seat of authority and action. There was work to be done. God had plans for the whole planet, not just Eden.

Eden—Like No Place on Earth

GOD DOES NOT ACT WITHOUT PURPOSE. HE CREATED THE HEAVENLY HOST , intending that they carry out his will. Did he create them to meet some need in him? No. A complete, perfect being has no deficiencies. God has no need of a council, but he uses one. Similarly, God did not need humans to steward his creation or, later on, to reveal that Messiah had come. But those were his choices as well. God delighted in creating proxies to represent him and carry out his wishes. His decisions in that regard have ramifications.

EARTH WAS NOT EDEN

The first observation is one that is transparent from the biblical text, but somehow missed by many: *Not all the world was Eden*. It's important to establish that Eden was, rather than the entire earthly creation, only a tiny part of it. This distinction will become important in future chapters. The text tells us this in several ways.

Eden was actually a tiny plot on Earth. Its location is circumscribed by geographical markers ([Gen 2:8–14](#)). In the last chapter we saw that the Ugaritic council met in a garden where two rivers intersected (“in the midst of the fountains of the double deep”). Eden is described with four water sources:

¹⁰ Now a river flowed out from Eden that watered the garden, and from there it diverged and became four branches. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It went around all the land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² (The gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stones are there.) ¹³ And the name of the second is Gihon. It went around all the land of Cush. ¹⁴ And the name of the third is Tigris. It flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates ([Gen 2:10–14](#)).

This description alone tells us quite clearly the earth was not Eden. There are other indicators.

In [Genesis 1:26–27](#) God made humankind as his imagers, his representatives in this new domain. This functional view of the image becomes clear in the commands of verse [28](#):

And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, and over every animal that moves upon the earth.”

Notice that verse [28](#) says that the *earth* needed filling. This does not refer to Eden. Eden has not even appeared yet in the Genesis story. Its first mention comes in [Genesis 2:8](#):

And Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

The garden of Eden is said to be *in the east*. The directional word informs us that there were other parts of the earth. God “planted” this garden. We know from Genesis 1 that the dry land (called

“earth”) already existed. It had to in order for God to plant a garden in it to the east.

[Genesis 2:15](#) is also of interest. The man God has made is put in the garden for a reason: “And Yahweh God took the man and set him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and to keep it.” The man’s job is to take care of the garden. Earlier in [Genesis 1:28](#), his job was to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule....” Of course the man needs a woman for that, but she hasn’t even been created yet in Genesis 2 when God puts the man in the garden. Cultivation of the garden and subduing the earth are not the same tasks.

Genesis 1 and 2 aren’t intended to be chronological in their relationship. What they reveal is that the man’s original task was to care for the garden, where he lived (Gen 2). After he gets a partner (Gen 1), God says to both of them (the commands are plural in Hebrew) to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over its creatures.

We can see that the tasks of humanity, taken in tandem with the earlier observations that require Eden and Earth to be distinct, distinguish Eden and the earth. It makes no sense to subdue the garden of God. It’s already what God wants it to be. There’s no place on Earth like it. If it needed subjugation, that would imply imperfection. That’s something that cannot be said about Eden, but it’s true of the rest of the world. For sure God was happy with the whole creation. He pronounced it “very good” ([Gen 1:31](#)). But “very good” is not perfect.¹

Lastly, Eden and Earth must be distinct since, after the fall, Adam and Eve are expelled from it and have to live elsewhere. Unless you believe that they were sent into outer space, you must acknowledge Eden and Earth as distinct.

Observing this distinction affects a range of biblical concepts and provides solutions to a few thorny theological problems. But I’m only concerned with one issue here. The distinction helps us see that *the original task of humanity was to make the entire Earth like Eden*.

Adam and Eve lived in the garden. They cared for it. But the rest of the earth needed subduing. It wasn’t awful—in fact Genesis 1 tells us that it was habitable. But it wasn’t quite what Eden was. The *whole world* needs to be like God’s home. He could do the job himself, but he chose to create human imagers to do it for him. He issued the decree; they were supposed to make it happen. They were to do that by multiplying and following God’s direction.

Eden is where the idea of the kingdom of God begins. And it’s no coincidence that the Bible ends with the vision of a new Edenic Earth (Rev 21–22).

PROCLAMATION AND PARTNERSHIP

The working relationship between God and humankind, before and after the fall, involves genuine, meaningful participation on the part of God’s human imagers. This is most transparently seen as God works through figures like Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, the prophets, and the apostles. But the pattern extends to us, to all believers. There is nothing we do that God could not accomplish himself. But he has not chosen that method. Rather, he tells us what his will is and commands his loyal children to get the job done.

We saw in an earlier chapter that imaging status is something shared by human and nonhuman, divine beings. This fact is reflected in the plural language of [Genesis 1:26](#), when God said, “Let us make humankind.” The ensuing singular forms guided us to conclude that the passage has humankind created by a single creator, the God of Israel, who creates humans as his imagers. The prior plural

language was a clue that God's other family, the divine sons of God created sometime earlier, were also imagers of their creator.

Given this connection and backdrop, the participatory nature of the working relationship between God and his human imagers is no surprise. The heavenly council works under the same kind of arrangement. God decrees his will and leaves it to his administrative household to carry out those decrees. That's apparent from two Old Testament passages.

First Kings 22 provides a revealing glimpse into a divine council meeting. The first fifteen verses set the context. After three years of peace between Syria and Israel, King Jehoshaphat of Judah, the southern Israelite kingdom, paid a visit to Ahab, the king of Israel, the northern kingdom that had broken away from the tribes loyal to David's dynasty. The northern kings were described throughout the Old Testament as spiritually apostate. Ahab was arguably the worst of the bunch.

Ahab wanted Jehoshaphat to join forces with him in a plan to break the peace by attacking Ramoth-Gilead, which was under Syrian control. Ramoth-Gilead was part of the original tribal land of Gad and a Levitical city of refuge ([Josh 20:8](#); [21:38](#); [1 Chr 6:80](#); [Deut 4:43](#)). It didn't legitimately belong to the Syrians. That was Ahab's leverage.

Jehoshaphat agreed with this reasoning, but wanted to know whether Yahweh approved. The apostate king of Israel summoned about four hundred of his prophets, who told the kings they would win the battle. Suspicious, Jehoshaphat asked if there were any other prophets around to consult. Yes, there is one, Ahab answered—and made no secret of his hatred of that prophet. Micaiah, the prophet of Yahweh, always told Ahab things he didn't want to hear—like the truth.

Micaiah was summoned and asked whether the kings should go to war. At first he mocked Ahab, pretending to be like the other prophets, but Ahab wasn't stupid. Here's what happened next:

¹⁶ Then the king [Ahab] said to him, “How many times must I make you swear that you shall not tell me anything but truth in the name of Yahweh?” ¹⁷ So he [Micaiah] said, “I saw all of Israel scattering to the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd. Yahweh also said, ‘There are no masters for these, let them return in peace, each to his house.’ ” ¹⁸ Then the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not say to you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but disaster?”

¹⁹ And he [Micaiah] said, “Therefore, hear the word of Yahweh. I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne with all the hosts of heaven standing beside him from his right hand and from his left hand. ²⁰ And Yahweh said, ‘Who will entice Ahab so that he will go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?’ Then this one was saying one thing and the other one was saying another. ²¹ Then a spirit came out and stood before Yahweh and said, ‘I will entice him,’ and Yahweh said to him, ‘How?’ ²² He said, ‘I will go out and I will be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You shall entice and succeed, go out and do so.’ ²³ So then, see that Yahweh has placed a false spirit in the mouth of all of these your prophets, and Yahweh has spoken disaster concerning you” ([1 Kgs 22:16–23](#)).

This passage, specifically verses [19–22](#), describes a meeting between God and his divine council. Verse [20](#) tells us plainly that God had decided it was time for Ahab to die. God then asked the host of heaven standing in attendance *how Ahab's death should be accomplished*. God had decreed Ahab was going to die at Ramoth-Gilead, but the means of his death was not decreed. The council debated the matter until one of the spiritual beings came forward with a proposition (vv. [21–22](#)): “I will go

out and I will be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Upon hearing this, God said (paraphrasing), “Good. I know that will work—go get it done.”

There are other glimpses of this kind of divine decision making, where God’s decree and genuine participation on the part of his council are both evident.

In Daniel 4 Nebuchadnezzar relates a dream wherein he saw an enormous tree that reached into the heavens. Nebuchadnezzar tells Daniel that in the dream he saw a watcher—a term for a divine being (a “holy one”) in this chapter of Daniel ([Dan 4:13, 17, 23](#)). The watcher proclaims that the tree will be chopped down, leaving only its stump. The tree and the stump are symbols for Nebuchadnezzar, who, the watcher announces, will lose his mind and become like an animal ([Dan 4:13–16](#)).

In verse [17](#) readers discover who decreed this fate for Nebuchadnezzar:

The sentence is by the decree of the watchers,
and the decision by the command of the holy ones,
in order that the living will know
that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of humankind,
and to whomever he wills he gives it ([Dan 4:17](#)).

What’s fascinating here is that the source of the decree is said to be the watchers, but sovereignty belongs to the singular Most High. Later, when Daniel interprets the dream, he says:

This is the explanation, O king, and it *is* a decree of the Most High that has come upon my lord the king ([Dan 4:24](#)).

Here we see that the ultimate authority behind the decree is God, the Most High, and yet the watcher who delivered the decree in verse [17](#) said “the sentence is by decree of the watchers.” Both God and his divine agents were involved in the decision.

Daniel adds a few details as he continues. Note the emphasis in bold carefully:

[25](#) you [Nebuchadnezzar] will be driven away from human society and you will dwell with the animals of the field, and you will be caused to graze grass like the oxen yourself, and you will be watered with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time will pass over you until that you have acknowledged that **the Most High is sovereign** over the kingdom of humankind, and to whom he wills he gives it. [26](#) And in that they said to leave alone the stump of the tree’s root, so your kingdom will be restored for you when you acknowledge that **heaven is sovereign** ([Dan 4:25–26](#)).

Verse [25](#) says very plainly that the Most High is sovereign. It is clearly singular. The phrase “heaven is sovereign” is interesting because the Aramaic word translated heaven (*shemayin*) is plural and is accompanied by a plural verb. The plurality of *shemayin* can point to either the members of the council or the council as a collective. In any event, the wording is suggestive of the interchange between council and Most High earlier in Daniel 4.

The takeaway is that God rules over the heavenly realm and the earthly realm with the genuine assistance of his imager-representatives. He decrees and they carry out his commands. These points are clear. What is perhaps less clear is that the way God’s will is carried out and accomplished is open—imagers can make free decisions to accomplish God’s will. God decrees the ends, but the

means can (and apparently are at times) left up to the imagers.

This balance of sovereignty and free will is essential for understanding what happened in Eden. The choices made by human and nonhuman beings described in Genesis 3 were neither coerced nor needed by Yahweh for sake of his greater plan. The risk of creating image bearers who might freely choose rebellion was something God foresaw but did not decree. We'll examine all that in more detail in the next chapter.

Only God Is Perfect

LIKE THE CREATION STORY, THE STORY OF THE FALL IN GENESIS 3 IS ONE OF those episodes in Scripture that anyone acquainted with the Bible seems to know. But there's more to the story than meets the eye. Over the next few chapters I'll draw attention to some often-overlooked details in the story and the questions they raise.

What we've covered in earlier chapters serves as crucial backdrop for understanding the fall. Eden was both the divine abode and the nerve center for God's plan for Earth. The worldview of the biblical writer was: Where Yahweh is, so is his council.

Yahweh had announced his intention to create humankind as his imagers ([Gen 1:26](#)). The council members heard that these humans, new members in Yahweh's family, would be tasked with overspreading the earth, advancing God's kingdom rule. They were Yahweh's choice to be steward-kings over a global Eden under his authority.

We'll soon see that one divine being dissented. But how could there be trouble in paradise? *How could things have gone so wrong?*

The book of Job contains some of the clues.

THE BACKDROP

Job is an odd book. That's part of what makes it so interesting. The story opens with a divine council scene—the sons of God appear before Yahweh ([Job 1:6](#)). During the council meeting the *satan* shows up. His rank is not clear. The language is ambiguous with respect to whether he is of the same level as the sons of God or is on the scene as a servant official to the council. The lower status is more likely, given what we learn about his job.

I use the phrase “the *satan*” deliberately. The Hebrew (*satan*) means something like “adversary,” “prosecutor,” or “challenger.” It speaks of an official legal function within a ruling body—in this case, Yahweh's council. When Yahweh asks the *satan* where he has been, we learn that his job involves investigating what is happening on earth ([Job 1:7](#)). He is, so to speak, Yahweh's eyes and ears on the ground, reporting what he has seen and heard.

The *satan* in Job 1–2 is not a villain. He's doing the job assigned to him by God. The book of Job does not identify the *satan* in this scene as the serpent of Genesis 3, the figure known in the New Testament as the devil. The Old Testament never uses the word *satan* of the serpent figure from Genesis 3. In fact, the word *satan* is not a proper personal noun in the Old Testament.¹

Old Testament scholars are well aware of all this. Their conclusion that *satan* is not a proper personal name in the Old Testament is driven by Hebrew grammar. Like English, Hebrew does not attach the definite article (the word “the”) to proper personal nouns. English speakers do not refer to themselves (or to another person) with phrases like “the Tom” or “the Sally.” I'm not “the Mike.” English doesn't use the definite article with personal names. Neither does Hebrew.

Most of the twenty-seven occurrences of *satan* in the Hebrew Bible, however, do indeed have the

definite article—including all the places English readers presume the devil is present ([Job 1:6–9](#), [12:2:1–4](#), [6–7](#); [Zech 3:1–2](#)). The *satan* described in these passages is not the devil. Rather, he’s an anonymous prosecutor, as it were, fulfilling a role in Yahweh’s council—bringing an accusatory report. The instances of *satan* in the Old Testament that lack the definite article also don’t refer to the devil or the serpent figure. Those occurrences describe either humans or the Angel of Yahweh, who is occasionally sent by God to “oppose” someone or execute judgment (e.g., [Num 22:22–23](#)).

The *function* of the office of the *satan* is why later Jewish writings began to adopt it as a proper name for the serpent figure from Genesis 3 who brought ruin to Eden. That figure opposed God’s choices for his human imagers. The dark figure of Genesis 3 was eventually thought of as the “mother of all adversaries,” and so the label *satan* got stuck to him. He deserves it. The point here is only that the Old Testament doesn’t use that term for the divine criminal of Eden.

In Job 1 the *satan* and God converse about Job. The *satan* gets a bit uppity, challenging God about Job’s integrity. We know the rest of the story—God gives the *satan* enough latitude to prove himself wrong, albeit at Job’s expense.

The beginning of Job is of interest to us because of two statements later in the book. In Job 4, one of Job’s friends, Eliphaz, responds to Job’s lament and wish for death ([Job 3:11](#)). He’s not much of a comfort. He questions Job’s belief that he has done nothing deserving of suffering ([Job 4:6](#)), something the reader knows is actually true ([Job 1:8](#)). Eliphaz says at one point:

¹⁷ Can a human being be more righteous than God,
or can a man be more pure than his Maker?

¹⁸ Look, he does not trust in his servants
and he charges his angels with error.

¹⁹ How much more dwellers in clay houses,
whose foundation is in the dust?

They are crushed like a moth ([Job 4:17–19](#)).

Who do you think you are, Job! A man isn’t more righteous than his Maker! Why would God consider you blameless when he doesn’t even look at his heavenly messengers that way? Eliphaz repeats the thought in [Job 15:14–15](#):

¹⁴ What is a human being, that he can be clean,
Or that one born of a woman can be righteous?

¹⁵ Look, he does not trust his holy ones,
and the heavens are not clean in his eyes.

What Eliphaz says is significant. Here are two scriptural statements that *God’s heavenly council members are corruptible; they are not perfect*.

That’s not terribly profound on the surface. The only truly perfect Being is God himself. God never actually said that Job was incorruptible and perfect, only that he was blameless at the time of the council meeting. God knows that Job could indeed fail—just like the divine beings in his council. Even the lesser *elohim* cannot be completely trusted.

God knows that none of his imagers, divine or human, can be completely trusted. The reason is straightforward. Though imagers are like God, they aren't God. That's a truth we know all too well from our own struggles and experiences in a fallen world.

Without genuine free will, imagers cannot truly represent God. We saw earlier that the image of God is not an attribute or ability. Rather, it is a status conferred by God on all humans, that of representing God. God created humankind to extend Eden over all the earth. That's what the commands of [Genesis 1:27](#), collectively referred to by theologians as the dominion mandate, are about. Humanity was to multiply, steward the creation, and govern on God's behalf. The goal was to care for the earth and harness its gifts for the betterment of fellow human imagers, all the while enjoying the presence of God.

How all that happens in our postfall world varies from person to person. In our experience, humans have widely differing abilities. Some never see birth due to natural death or abortion. Others manifest in their bodies the effects of a world that isn't Eden. Some human beings have severe mental and physical defects that impede or prevent representing God according to the original vision. And even if we're blessed with what we consider normal health, we're all subject to disease, injury, aging, and the weakness of a world subject to corruption. But imaging is bound to our humanity. Regardless of ability or stage, human life is sacred precisely because we are the creatures God put on earth to represent him.

Humans who survive birth without suffering severe impairment, however, are able to represent God as originally intended. They do so by means of a spectrum of abilities we have as humans. These abilities are part of our being like God. They are attributes we share with God, such as intelligence and creativity. The attributes God shared with us are the *means* to imaging, not the image status itself. Imaging status and our attributes are related but not identical concepts.

One of these attributes is freedom—free will that reveals itself in decision making. If humanity had not been created with genuine freedom, representation of God would have been impossible. Humans would not mirror their Maker. They could not accurately *image* him. God is no robot. We are reflections of a free Being, not a cosmic automaton.

Put another way, God did not intend to create imagers that did nothing. True, even if an imager accomplished nothing (say, an aborted human fetus), they would still be an imager. But God's original intent was to arm his imagers with both the will and the ability to carry out his decrees. Representation of God as his imagers and possession of free will are inextricably related.

Since the lesser *elohim* were also created as God's imagers, they too must have free will. Both human and nonhuman imagers are less than their Maker. Only God is perfect in the possession and exercise of his attributes. Every lesser being is imperfect. The only perfect Being is God. *This* is why things could, and did, go wrong in Eden.

If that was true even in Eden—the place on earth where the council was present—then *being in the presence of God is no guarantee that free-will beings will never stray or act out of self-will*. Only God is perfect. Beings that are lesser than God, whether human or divine, are not perfect. The potential for error and disobedience is by definition possible.² Trouble *could* happen in paradise, and of course it did. God's decision to create free imagers involved that risk.

You might think that all the risk was ours—after all, the world of humanity has suffered in its wake. But the only way in which there was no risk involved for God is if you define risk as the threat of harm. God cannot be harmed. But he can be grieved. He is moved by human sin and suffering ([Gen](#)

6:6; Isa 54:6–7). God was willing to risk that to have humanity.

What we've learned leaves us with important questions. Even though free will is necessitated by imaging and representation, is *risk* the right word to use of God's decision? If God foreknew all the things that would happen as a result of his decision, didn't he also predestine those things? But if he did, how can we even talk about free will? How are Adam and Eve truly responsible? What about the notion that they would "know good and evil" (Gen 3:5) and be like God—does that mean God has an evil streak in him?

These questions have long been debated. It may therefore surprise you when I say they all have straightforward answers. What we've seen in this and earlier chapters about Eden, God, and his divine council prepares us for the answers. God does not delight in evil and suffering. Nor does he need it for his sovereign plan. The conundrums evaporate if we just allow the text to say what it says. We need to lay our theological systems aside, answer these questions like an ancient Israelite would have, and embrace the results.

Peril and Providence

WE CLOSED THE LAST CHAPTER WITH A SERIES OF QUESTIONS. HOW IS IT appropriate to talk about God's decisions involving risk? If God knew what was going to happen—and if he predestines the events—where's the risk? Perhaps Adam and Eve needed to be taught a lesson about good and evil. Surely God didn't learn anything. But how do we get God off the moral hook when it comes to the appearance of sin and evil?

An ancient Israelite would have thought differently about these questions than most believers do today. One reason is that we have layers of tradition that filter the Bible in our thinking. It's time to peel those layers away.

GOD'S GIFT

We might wonder why God doesn't do away with evil and suffering on earth. The answer sounds paradoxical: He *can't*—because that would require elimination of all his imagers. But he will at the last day. For evil to be eliminated, Earth and humanity as we know it would have to end. God has a chronology, a plan, for this ultimate development. It could be no other way, given his decision to create time-bound humans as the vehicles for his rule. But in the meantime, we experience the positive wonders of life as well. Though God knew the risk of Eden, he deemed the existence of humankind preferable to our eternal absence.

Despite the risk of evil, free will is a wonderful gift. God's decision was a loving one. Understanding that requires only a consideration of the two alternatives: (1) not having life at all, and (2) being a mindless robot, capable only of obeying commands and responding to programming.

If our decisions were all coerced, how authentic would those “decisions” actually be? If love is coerced or programmed, is it really love? Is *any* such decision really a genuine *decision* at all? It isn't. For a decision to be real, it must be made against an alternative that could be chosen.

We all know the difference between freedom and coercion. The IRS doesn't tell you that you *may perhaps* pay your taxes by April 15. When you behave wrongly, where would the emotional healing of forgiveness be if the person you offended was merely programmed to say those words, or coerced to say them? Free will is a gift, despite the risk.

KNOWING GOOD AND EVIL

Several phrases in [Genesis 3:5, 22](#) that have puzzled interpreters become more understandable in light of what we've been discussing.

In [Genesis 3:5](#) the serpent (Hebrew: *nachash*) says to Eve: “For God (*elohim*) knows that on the day you *both* eat from it, then your eyes will be opened and you *both* shall be like gods (*elohim*), knowing good and evil.” This verse is like [Psalm 82:1](#). The word *elohim* occurs two times in the same verse. The first instance is singular because of grammar (the verbal “knows” is singular in form). While most English translations render the second instance as “God,” it should be plural

because of the context supplied by [Genesis 3:22](#). That verse reads: “And Yahweh God said, “Look—the man has become **as one of us**, to know good and evil.” The phrase “one of us” informs us that, as in [Genesis 1:26](#), God is speaking to his council members—the *elohim*. This tells us clearly that the second instance of *elohim* in [Genesis 3:5](#) should be plural.

This fits well with [Psalm 8:5](#), where the psalmist notes that humankind was created “a little lower than *elohim*.” We aren’t a “little” lower than God—we’re light years lower. Relatively speaking, the gap is narrower if we assume the reference in the psalm is plural (“a little lower than the *elohim*”). This is the way the writer of Hebrews takes the phrase. In [Hebrews 2:7](#) the writer quotes [Psalm 8:5](#) from the Septuagint. That translation reads the plural “angels” for *elohim*, a clear plural.

In [Genesis 3:5](#), Eve is being told that if she violates God’s command, she and Adam will become as *elohim*, knowing good and evil. Notice that the phrase is “*knowing* good and evil,” not *will be capable of* good and evil. As free-will beings, Adam and Eve were already capable of disobedience. Like God’s holy ones in council, they were imperfect. But Adam and Eve had not yet experienced evil—either by their own commission or as bystanders.

The “knowing good and evil” phrase with the same Hebrew vocabulary occurs elsewhere. [Deuteronomy 1:39](#) says:

And your little children, who you thought shall become plunder, and your sons, who do not today **know good or bad**, shall themselves go there, and I will give it to them, and they shall take possession of it.

The little children referred to here are the generation of Israelites that would arise after the original generation that had escaped from Egypt at the exodus. That first generation had been sentenced by God to wander in the desert for forty years until they died off for their refusal to enter the promised land in conquest (Num 14). The new generation did not know good or evil and would be allowed entrance into the land.

The meaning is clearly that the second generation *was not held morally accountable* for the sins of their parents. Though as children they were under the authority of their parents, they had no decision-making authority in the matter and were thus not willing participants. Therefore they were not considered liable. They were *innocent*.

The same perspective makes sense in Genesis 3. Prior to knowing good and evil, Adam and Eve were innocent. They had never made a willing, conscious decision to disobey God. They had never seen an act of disobedience, either. When they fell, that changed. They did indeed know good and evil, just as God and the rest of his heavenly council members—including the *nachash* (“serpent”).¹

EVIL AND FOREKNOWLEDGE

Acknowledging God’s foreknowledge and also the genuine free will of humankind, especially with respect to the fall, raises obvious questions: Was the fall predestined? If so, how was the disobedience of Adam and Eve free? How are they truly responsible?

Since we aren’t told much in Genesis about how human freedom works in relation to divine attributes like foreknowledge, predestination, and omniscience, we need to look elsewhere in Scripture for some clarification. Let’s look at [1 Samuel 23:1–13](#). Note the underlining carefully.

¹ Now they told David, “Look, the Philistines are fighting in Keilah and they are raiding the threshing floors.” ² So David inquired of Yahweh, saying, “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?” And Yahweh said to David, “Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah.” ³ But David’s men said to him, “Look, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more if we go to Keilah to the battle lines of the Philistines?” ⁴ So David again inquired of Yahweh, and Yahweh answered him and said, “Get up, go down to Keilah, for I am giving the Philistines into your hand.” ⁵ So David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines. They drove off their livestock and dealt them a heavy blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah. ⁶ Now when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, he went down with an ephod in his hand. ⁷ When it was told to Saul that David had gone to Keilah, Saul said, “God has given him into my hand, because he has shut himself in by going into a city with two barred gates. ⁸ Saul then summoned all of the army for the battle, to go down to Keilah to lay a siege against David and his men. ⁹ When David learned that Saul was plotting evil against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod here.” ¹⁰ And David said, “**O Yahweh, God of Israel**, your servant has clearly heard that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city because of me. ¹¹ **Will the rulers of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down** as your servant has heard? O Yahweh, God of Israel, please tell your servant!” And Yahweh said, “**He will come down.**” ¹² Then David said, “**Will the rulers of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?**” And Yahweh said, “**They will deliver you.**” ¹³ So David and his men got up, about six hundred men, and **went out from Keilah** and wandered wherever they could go. When it was told to Saul that **David had escaped from Keilah, he stopped his pursuit.**

In this account, David appeals to the omniscient God to tell him about the future. In the first instance (23:1–5), David asks God whether he should go to the city of Keilah and whether he’ll successfully defeat the Philistines there. God answers in the affirmative in both cases. David goes to Keilah and indeed defeats the Philistines.

In the second section (23:6–13), David asks the Lord two questions: (1) will his nemesis Saul come to Keilah and threaten the city on account of David’s presence? And (2) will the people of Keilah turn him over to Saul to avoid Saul’s wrath? Again, God answers both questions affirmatively: “He will come down,” and “They will deliver you.”

Neither of these events that God foresaw ever actually happened. Once David hears God’s answers, he and his men leave the city. When Saul discovers this fact (v. 13), he *abandons* his trip to Keilah. Saul never made it to the city. The men of Keilah never turned David over to Saul.

Why is this significant? *This passage clearly establishes that divine foreknowledge does not necessitate divine predestination.* God foreknew what Saul would do and what the people of Keilah would do given a set of circumstances. In other words, God foreknew a *possibility*—but this foreknowledge did not mandate that the possibility was actually predestined to happen. The events never happened, so by definition they could not have been predestined. And yet the omniscient God did indeed foresee them. Predestination and foreknowledge are *separable*.

The theological point can be put this way:

That which never happens can be foreknown by God, but it is not predestined, since it never happened.

But what about things that *do* happen? They can obviously be foreknown, but were they predestined?

Since we have seen above that foreknowledge *in itself* does not necessitate predestination, all that foreknowledge truly guarantees is that something is foreknown. If God foreknows some event that happens, then he *may have* predestined that event. But the fact that he foreknew an event does not require its predestination if it happens. The only guarantee is that God foreknew it correctly, whether it turns out to be an actual event or a merely possible event.

The theological point can be put this way:

Since foreknowledge doesn't require predestination, foreknown events that happen may or may not have been predestined.

This set of ideas goes against the grain of several modern theological systems. Some of those systems presume that foreknowledge requires predestination, and so everything must be predestined—all the way from the fall to the holocaust, to what you'll choose off a dinner menu. Others dilute foreknowledge by proposing that God doesn't foreknow all possibilities, since all possibilities cannot happen. Or they posit other universes where all the possibilities happen. These ideas are unnecessary in light of 1 Samuel 23 and other passages that echo the same fundamental idea: foreknowledge does not necessitate predestination.

Things we discussed earlier in this book allow us to take the discussion further. God may foreknow an event and predestine that event, but such predestination does not necessarily include decisions that lead up to that event. In other words, God may know and predestine the end—that something is ultimately going to happen—without predestining the means to that end.

We saw this precise relationship when we looked at decision making in God's divine council. The passages in [1 Kings 22:13–23](#) and Daniel 4 informed us that God can decree something and then leave the means up to the decisions of other free-will agents. The end is sovereignly ordained; the means to that end may or may not be.

IMPLICATIONS

An ancient Israelite would have embraced this parsing of foreknowledge, predestination, sovereignty, and free will. He would not have been encumbered by a theological tradition. She would have understood that *this is the way God himself has decided his rule over human affairs will work*. These are *Yahweh's* decisions, and we accept them.

This has significant implications for not only the fall, but the presence of evil in our world in general. God is not evil. There is no biblical reason to argue that God predestined the fall, though he foreknew it. There is no biblical reason to assert that God predestined all the evil events throughout human history simply because he foreknew them.

There is also no biblical coherence to the idea that God factored all evil acts into his grand plan for the ages. This is a common, but flawed, softer perspective, adopted to avoid the previous notion that God directly predestines evil events. It unknowingly implies that God's "perfect" plan *needed* to incorporate evil acts because—well, because we see them every day, and surely they can't just *happen*, since God foreknows everything. Therefore (says this flawed perspective) they must just be part of how God decided best to direct history.

God does not *need* the rape of a child to happen so that good may come. His foreknowledge

didn't require the holocaust as part of a plan that would give us the kingdom on earth. *God does not need evil as a means to accomplish anything.*

God foreknew the fall. That foreknowledge did not propel the event. God also foreknew a solution to the fall that he himself would guarantee, a solution that entered his mind long before he laid the foundations of the earth. God was ready. The risk was awful, but he loved the notion of humanity too much to call the whole thing off.

Evil does not flow from a first domino that God himself toppled. Rather, evil is the perversion of God's good gift of free will. It arises from the choices made by imperfect imagers, not from God's prompting or predestination. God does not need evil, but he has the power to take the evil that flows from free-will decisions—human or otherwise—and use it to produce good and his glory through the obedience of his loyal imagers, who are his hands and feet on the ground *now*.

All of this means that what we choose to do is an important part of how things will turn out. What we do *matters*. God has decreed the ends to which all things will come. As believers, we are prompted by his Spirit to be the good means to those decreed ends.

But the Spirit is not the only influence. The experiences of our lives involve other imagers, both good and evil, including divine imagers we cannot see. The worldview of the biblical author was an animate one, where the members of the unseen world interact with humans. Loyal members of God's "congregation" (council), sent to minister to us ([Heb 1:14](#)), have embraced God's Edenic vision—we are brothers and sisters ([Heb 2:10–18](#)).

Other divine beings would oppose God's plan. The original dissident takes center stage in the next chapter.

Section Summary

We're just at the beginning of our journey. But we've learned some key concepts already—concepts that will emerge elsewhere in the Bible to form patterns. Other ideas will accrue to these concepts, and the mosaic will start to take form.

There are several takeaways from this first section of the book that will take on more shape and definition as we proceed.

First, God has a divine family—a heavenly assembly, or council, of *elohim*. These *elohim* are not a replacement for the Trinity, nor do they add to it. Yahweh is among the *elohim*, but he is superior to all other *elohim*. He is their creator and sovereign master. He is unique. Since Jesus is Yahweh in flesh, he too is distinct from, and superior to, all *elohim*. While God has no need of a council, Scripture makes it clear that he uses one. His divine family is his divine administration. The *elohim* serve him to carry out his decrees.

God also has a human family and administration. Their status and function mirror the divine family-administration. Just as with the members of the divine council who represent God in what they are tasked to do, so humans are God's imaging representatives. Just as God doesn't need a divine council, he doesn't need humans, either—but he has chosen to use them to further his intentions for Earth.

Heaven and Earth are separate but connected realms. God's households operate in tandem toward a mutual destiny. Their points of intersection along the way inform many other threads of biblical theology.

With Eden the divine had come to earth, and earth would be brought into conformity. Humans were created to enjoy everlasting access to God's presence, working side by side with God's loyal *elohim*. But this yearning of God's came with risk, a risk that was fully known by him and accepted. Free will in the hearts and hands of imperfect beings, whether human or divine, means imagers can opt for their own authority in place of God's.

Sadly, that will also become a pattern. Both of God's households will experience rebellion. The result will be the commencement of a long war against God's original intention. The good news is that there will be an equally committed effort on God's part to preserve what he began.

DIVINE TRANSGRESSIONS

Trouble in Paradise

THE STORY OF THE FALL OF HUMANITY IN GENESIS 3 SEEMS STRAIGHTFORWARD, perhaps because we've heard it told so many times. The truth is that the passage presents a lot of interpretive questions. We've devoted some time to a couple of them in the previous chapter. Now it's time to examine the main character, the serpent. Once again, there's a lot more than meets the eye here.

One of the things that always bothered me about the story was why Eve wasn't scared witless when the serpent spoke to her. There's no indication that she thought the incident unusual. I've run into some odd explanations for that, such as, "Maybe animals back then could walk and talk." That sort of speculation is aimed at preserving an overliteralized view of the text, and it's often accompanied by an appeal to science—a claim that snake anatomy shows snakes once had legs. It's a bit misguided when someone attempts to defend biblical literalism by appealing to the evolutionary history of snakes. And anyway, the whole approach misses the point. It also presumes that the villain was simply an animal. He wasn't.

The truth is that an ancient reader would not have expected Eve to be frightened. Given the context—she was in Eden, the realm of Yahweh and his *elohim* council—it would have been clear that she was conversing with a divine being. As we've seen in earlier chapters, the biblical author has telegraphed that Eve was on divine turf.

GENESIS 3 IN CONTEXT

In ancient Near Eastern literature of the Old Testament world, animal speech is not uncommon. The context for such speaking is that of magic, which of course is tied to the world of the gods, or direct divine intervention. No Egyptian, for example, would have presumed that the animals they experienced in their normal lives could talk. But when the gods or magical forces were in view, that was a different story. Animals were often the vehicle for manifesting a divine presence or power in a story. The kind of animal would often depend on characteristics associated with that animal, or on the status of that animal in a culture's religion.

Consequently, the point of Genesis 3 is not to inform us about ancient zoology or a time when animals could talk. We're not in the realm of science *by design*. Genesis telegraphed simple but profound ideas to Israelite readers: The world you experience was created by an all-powerful God; human beings are his created representatives; Eden was his abode; he was accompanied by a supernatural host; one member of that divine entourage was not pleased by God's decisions to create humanity and give them dominion. All that leads to how humanity got into the mess it's in.

In some respects, we *know* that the Genesis "serpent" wasn't *really* a member of the animal kingdom. We have other passages to help us grasp that point, particularly in the New Testament. We understand that, even though New Testament writers refer to the serpent back in Eden, they are really referring to a supernatural entity—not a mere member of the animal kingdom (2 Cor 11:3; 1 Thess 3:5; Rev 12:9).

This is how we need to think about the story of Genesis 3. An Israelite would have known that the

episode described interference in the human drama by a divine being, a malcontent from within Yahweh’s council.¹ The vocabulary used by the writer reveals several things about the divine enemy that has emerged from the council. If we’re thinking only in terms of a snake, we’ll miss the messaging.

My task in this chapter and the next is to help you think beyond the literalness of the serpent language. If it’s true that the enemy in the garden was a supernatural being, then he wasn’t a snake.²

But it’s also true that the story is told as it is for a reason. As odd as it sounds, the vocabulary and the imagery are designed to alert readers to the presence of a divine being, not a literal snake. Making that case will involve comparing Genesis 3 to other Old Testament passages. But to see that those passages are indeed conceptually linked to Genesis 3, we need to review some of things we’ve learned.

Eden was the divine abode and, therefore, the place that Yahweh held council meetings. Here are some of the terms and verses associated with Eden we briefly noted in an earlier chapter. I’ve added the Hebrew words behind the English.

Hebrew Term	English Meaning	Concept	Important Verses
elim, elohim (plural)	“gods”	council members	Gen 3:5, 22
gan	“garden”	Divine abode, council meeting place	Gen 2:8–10, 15–16 Gen 3:1–3, 8, 10, 23–24
’ed nahar yamim	“(watery) mist” “river” “seas, waters”	description of the well-watered garden of the council	Gen 2:6, 10–14; Ezek 28:2
har	“mount, mountain”	mountain range where divine council met	Ezek 28:13
moshab elohim	“seat of the gods” (place of governing authority)	the divine assembly	Ezek 28:2

You can see quickly that, other than Genesis 2–3, the other source of verse citations is Ezekiel 28. That’s one of the chapters conceptually linked to Genesis 3. Its connection is explicit. [Ezekiel 28:13–14](#) refers to “Eden, the garden of God ... God’s holy mountain.”

The table does not list all the points of connection between the two. There are a number of others, most of them hotly debated by scholars.³ Back in the first chapter I told you that there are many interpretations for strange passages in the Bible, but the best ones are those that make sense in the context of many others—the mosaic. The relationship of Genesis 3 to Ezekiel 28 and other passages is going to illustrate that point.

EZEKIEL 28

Ezekiel 28 is not specifically about the fall of humankind. It’s also not a commentary on Genesis 3. The chapter begins with God chastising the prince of Tyre ([Ezek 28:1–8](#)). God accuses this prince of extraordinary arrogance. In verse [2](#) the prince considers himself a god (*el*), who sits in the seat of the gods (*moshab elohim*), a term associated with the divine council.⁴

The choice of *el* for who the prince considers himself to be is interesting. It also appears in verse [9](#), where it is in parallel to *elohim*. The word *el* is another word that means “god” in Hebrew and

other Semitic languages. The people of Ugarit called their high god El—they used the term as a proper name. So did the people of Tyre, which was a Phoenician city. The Phoenician religion had a divine council led by El, who was also called *elyon* (“Most High”) in Phoenician texts and considered the creator of the earth.

To the ancient reader familiar with El, the notion that the prince of Tyre would think himself fit to rule in El’s place (or even to be a more generic deity-participant in the divine council) would be ludicrous. For biblical writers, the idea was also offensive. For them Yahweh was Most High—the true king of all gods and creator of heaven and earth. This is why the biblical writers refer to Yahweh as *el-elyon* (“God Most High”; [Gen 14:20, 22](#)). The point of assigning *el* and *elyon* to Yahweh was not to endorse how Phoenicians and residents of Ugarit thought about their gods, but to assert Yahweh’s superiority. He was incomparable among spiritual beings; the others were pretenders. Consequently, the biblical writers would have viewed the human arrogance of the prince of Tyre as an affront to the God of Israel.

God proceeds to acknowledge the great intelligence of this prince, but reminds him that he is no god, and certainly not the Most High ([Ezek 28:2–6](#)). This sort of arrogance must be punished. Judgment will come. God asks sarcastically (v. 9), “Will you indeed still say ‘I am a god!’ before the face of your killers?”

In verse [10](#) God adds a strange detail: “You will die the death of the uncircumcised by the hand of strangers.” Since the prince of Tyre is an uncircumcised Gentile anyway, the phrasing seems to lack coherence. If we read a little further in Ezekiel, the point would be clear to an ancient reader. The underworld realm of the dead, Sheol, is described by Ezekiel as the place where the uncircumcised warrior-king enemies of Israel find themselves ([Ezek 32:21, 24–30, 32](#); [Isa 14:9](#)). This is the place of the Rephaim dead, quasi-supernatural beings we’ll encounter later.

It is at this point that God has the prophet raise a lament over the prince of Tyre, the brilliant prince whose arrogance led to his fall, not only to the earth but *under* the earth. God, through the prophet, begins:

- [12](#) You were a perfect model of an example,
full of wisdom and perfect of beauty.
- [13](#) You were in Eden, the garden of God,
and every precious stone was your adornment:
carnelian, topaz and moonstone,
turquoise, onyx and jasper,
sapphire, malachite and emerald.
And gold was the craftsmanship of your settings
and your mountings in you;
on the day when you were created they were prepared ([Ezek 28:12–13](#)).

These verses raise questions. The prince of Tyre wasn’t in Eden—he was in Tyre. We see now that, although Ezekiel 28 is about the prince of Tyre, in describing this prince’s arrogance, downfall, and original state, the prophet utilizes an older tale of a downfall *in Eden*.

THE HUBRIS OF ADAM?

Many scholars argue that the Edenic figure in view is Adam. That perspective is workable with parts of the description, but not all of them. The more coherent alternative is the serpent—more pointedly, a divine being who has forgotten his place in the pecking order.

But where do we see a serpent in Ezekiel 28? Let's look first at what's clear before addressing that question.

This “prince” was in Eden, the garden of God (v. 13). He is beautiful—words like *shining* or *radiant* are what come to mind when reading about the panoply of gems that were his “adornment” (vv. 12b–13).

Some have taken this language to refer to a literal jewel-encrusted garment worn by the human prince. They in turn argue that the prince of Eden was Adam. They also note that many of the jewels listed here correspond to the jewels on the breastplate of the Israelite high priest ([Exod 28:17–20](#); [39:10–13](#)). The picture, they say, is Adam as priest-king of Eden. Since Jesus was the second Adam and a priest-king, the analogy fits. The backdrop to the prince of Tyre's arrogance is the rebellious Adam, not the serpent.

This sounds reasonable until you start looking at how “Adam” is characterized in the verses that follow.

- 14 You were an anointed guardian cherub,
and I placed you on God's holy mountain;
you walked in the midst of stones of fire.
- 15 You were blameless in your ways
from the day when you were created,
until wickedness was found in you.
- 16 In the abundance of your trading,
they filled the midst of you with violence, and you sinned;
and I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,
and I expelled you, the guardian cherub,
from the midst of the stones of fire.
- 17 Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you ruined your wisdom because of your splendor.
I threw you on the ground before kings;
I have exposed you for viewing ([Ezek 28:14–17](#)).

Was Adam an “anointed guardian cherub”? Where do we read in Genesis 3 that Adam was filled with violence, or that his sin was propelled by the fact he was egotistically enamored of his own beauty and splendor? When was Adam cast to the ground to be exposed before kings (v. 17)?

All of the phrases alluded to in the questions above are important. Dealing with them will take the rest of this chapter and the next. The key question that frames any discussion of them is this: Is Ezekiel drawing on a tale about the rebellion of a *divine* being against God, or about *Adam's* rebellion against God? I believe the former is more coherent, a decision that links what's going on here back to the only *divine* rebel in Genesis 3—the serpent. In what remains of this chapter, I'll begin to explain my reasoning, and then continue that exploration in the next chapter.⁵

ANOTHER APPROACH

[Ezekiel 28:12b](#) addresses the prince of Tyre this way: “You were a perfect model of an example.” Some translations have “You were the signet of perfection.” This line is one of the more troublesome in the book for translation. Some scholars go as far as to list it among the more problematic in the entire Old Testament.⁶ The Hebrew word behind “perfect model” or “signet ring” (*ch-w-t-m*) is the crux of the problem. The word is not a noun, but a participle that literally means “the sealer.” A translation of “signet ring” takes the term to denote some object, but the term is addressed as a person (“You”). The fact that this “sealer” is described as being “full of wisdom” and “perfect in beauty” also makes it clear that an object is not in view, but some intelligent person or entity.

The question of course is just how this entity should be identified. Ultimately, the answer to this question derives from the answer to the previous question of whether Ezekiel is drawing on a story about a divine rebel or a human one. That question is the focus of the next chapter. But there are certain observations that can be made here that will help frame that discussion.

Let’s reconsider the gemstones that describe the appearance of the “the sealer” in [Ezekiel 28:13](#). As I mentioned earlier, proponents of the view that Ezekiel is drawing on Adam’s rebellion for his analogous portrayal of the prince of Tyre want to argue that the gemstones point to a human priest-king. But the “adornment” can quite easily be telegraphing something else—divinity. All of the gems have one thing in common—they shine or sparkle. Luminescence is a characteristic of divine beings or divine presence across the ancient Near Eastern world and the Old Testament (e.g., [Ezek 1:4–7, 27–28](#) [cf. [Ezek 10:19–20](#)]; [Dan 10:6](#); [Rev 1:15](#)). This description of the divine cherub in Eden is designed to convey divinity—a shining presence.

There are more details. The anointed cherub ultimately gets cast out of Eden, out from “the midst of the stones of fire.” We already know from other data that Eden is the place of the council. The “stones of fire” is another clue in that direction. This phrase is associated in other Jewish texts (1 Enoch 18:6–11; 1 Enoch 24–25) with the supernatural, mountainous dwelling of God and the divine council.⁷

It may be objected here that Eden was the dwelling place of God and so the “stones of fire” do not only point to the divine beings of Yahweh’s council. That much is true, but there’s more to the phrase than a dwelling place. Other scholars have also drawn attention to the ancient Near Eastern propensity to describe divine beings as stars. [Job 38:7](#) refers to the sons of God as “stars,” and [Isaiah 14:12–13](#) refers to a being fallen from heaven as the “Day Star, son of Dawn” (ESV) who wanted to ascend above the “stars of God” in the divine realm. The “stones of fire” therefore do not only describe an abode, but also divine entities in that abode.⁸

The “ground” to which this haughty divine being is cast and where he is disgraced is also of interest. The Hebrew word translated “ground” is *’erets*. It is a common term for the earth under our feet. But it is also a word that is used to refer to the underworld, the realm of the dead (e.g., [Jonah 2:6](#)), where ancient warrior-kings await their comrades in death ([Ezek 32:21, 24–30, 32](#); [Isa 14:9](#)). Adam, of course, was already on earth, so he couldn’t be sentenced there. And he didn’t wind up in the underworld. Yet this is the sort of language we would expect if the point was the expulsion of a heavenly being from the divine council.

Lastly, some scholars have suggested that the problematic term “sealer” (Hebrew *ch-w-t-m*) might be a cryptic reference to the serpent figure of Genesis 3. If their suggestion is correct, the point

of confusion becomes a clever signal that Adam is not in view.⁹

There is a rare phenomenon in ancient Semitic languages where the final letter *m* is silent (the “enclitic *mem*”).¹⁰ If the *m* is made silent in (in effect, removed from) our confusing word, the word becomes *ch-w-t*, which means “serpent” in Phoenician and other Semitic languages.¹¹ That noun in its lemma form is *ch-w-h*.¹²

Though the case for this reading cannot be made conclusively, its message would be to read [Ezekiel 28:11–19](#) in light of Genesis 3 and its serpent.¹³ It produces a play on words that takes us directly back to the scene of the fall in Eden. Since we know that we are not dealing with a mere animal in Genesis 3, but rather a divine being that is cast as creaturely, the description that this figure in the garden was an “anointed guardian cherub” makes sense. A cherub was a *divine* throne guardian in the ancient Near Eastern worldview.¹⁴ Ancient Near Eastern art and engravings have many examples of such throne guardians as animals, including serpents. There is little coherence to viewing the guardian cherub in Ezekiel 28 as the human Adam.

Let’s summarize where this leaves us. Ezekiel 28 browbeats the prince of Tyre using an ancient tale of divine arrogance in Eden, where a member of Yahweh’s council thought himself on par with the Most High. This divine throne guardian was expelled from Eden to the “ground” or underworld.

These elements show up in another passage: Isaiah 14.¹⁵ We’ll consider what Isaiah says next and then take a fresh look at what went on in Eden.

Like the Most High?

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, WE SAW THAT EZEKIEL 28 PRESENTS US WITH the tragic portrait of the prince of Tyre. The prophet uses the literary strategy of drawing on an ancient story of a divine being in Eden who thought himself heading “the seat of the gods” (Ezek 28:2), the divine council. This being was punished with expulsion from Eden to the underworld. The portrait of this being as a divine guardian cherub, using the imagery of brilliant, shining gems and a serpent, has conceptual links to Genesis 3.

These elements also show up in Isaiah 14. We’ll consider that passage and then take another look at the serpent in Eden.

ISAIAH 14

In Isaiah 14:4, God tells the prophet to take up a “taunt” (Hebrew: *mashal*) against the king of Babylon. A *mashal* is better described as a comparative parable. The question to keep in mind as we proceed is, to whom is the king of Babylon being compared?¹

The beginning of the parable sounds as unfavorable to the king of Babylon as Ezekiel’s description of the prince of Tyre is to that ruler. The king of Babylon is called an “oppressor” (ESV; v. 4) who ruthlessly persecuted the nations (vv. 5–6). The world will finally be at rest when the oppressor is “laid low” (ESV; vv. 7–8). In anticipation of the joy of finally being rid of the king of Babylon, the prophet writes:

- ⁹ Sheol below is getting excited over you,
to meet you when you come;
it arouses the dead spirits [*rephaim*] for you,
all of the leaders of the earth [*’erets*].
It raises all of the kings of the nations from their thrones.
- ¹⁰ All of them will respond and say to you,
“You yourself also were made weak like us!
You have become the same as us!”
- ¹¹ Your pride is brought down to Sheol,
and the sound of your harps;
maggots are spread out beneath you like a bed,
and your covering is worms (Isa 14:9–11).

As in Ezekiel 28, the figure in Isaiah 14 who is the target of its diatribe goes to Sheol, the underworld. The Rephaim are there, here identified again as the dead warrior-kings (“you have become the same as us”). The king of Babylon will be one of these living dead, just like the prince of Tyre.

Recall that Ezekiel 28 shifted from the prince of Tyre to a divine figure in Eden. That shift informed us that the writer was using a story of cosmic, divine rebellion to, by comparison, portray

the arrogance of the earthly prince. After verse 11, Isaiah 14 shifts to a divine context with clear links to Ezekiel 28. Those connections in turn take us conceptually back to Genesis 3.

Isaiah 14:12–15 reads:

12 How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of dawn!
You are cut down to the ground, conqueror of nations!

13 And you yourself said in your heart,
“I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise up my throne above the stars of God;
and I will sit on the mountain of assembly
on the summit of Zaphon;

14 I will ascend to the high places of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.”

15 But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the depths of the pit (Isa 14:12–15).

The divine council context is transparent. You’ve already seen much of the terminology in chapter 6 about divine gardens and mountains.

The figure to whom the king of Babylon is being compared is a divine being fallen “from heaven” (v. 12). He is called the “morning star, son of dawn.” The language takes us back to Job 38:7, where the sons of God were called “morning stars.” But the Hebrew terms in Isaiah 14:12 are different than those in Job 38:7.

“Morning star, son of dawn” is an English rendering of the Hebrew *helel ben-shachar*, which literally means “shining one, son of the dawn.” When we talked about Job 38:7 in chapter 3, I noted that “morning stars” were the visible bright stars seen on the horizon as the sun rose. Astronomers (ancient and modern) knew another celestial object that behaved the same way—an object so bright it could still be seen as the sun rose. That object was Venus, and so Venus, though a planet, became known to the ancients as the “bright morning star.”

In essence, borrowing the language of Ezekiel 28, Isaiah portrays this particular divine being as hopelessly enamored of his own brilliance. So great was his arrogance that he declared himself above all the “stars of God” (*kokebey el*), the other members of the divine council (Job 38:7).

That this “shining one” sought superiority over the other members of the divine council is indicated by the phrase “raise ... my throne” and his desire to “sit” on “the mountain of assembly.” That this “mountain of assembly” speaks of the divine council is clear from its location in “Zaphon” (“the north”; *tsaphon*) and the clouds. The “seat” language is familiar from Ezekiel 28:2 (the “seat of the gods”). Isaiah 14 reads like an attempted coup in the divine council. *Helel ben-shachar* wanted his seat in the divine assembly on the divine mountain to be above all others. He wanted to be “like the Most High” (*elyon*). But there can be only one of those.

It’s no surprise that *helel ben-shachar*, the shining one, meets the same end as the divine throne guardian in Ezekiel 28. In three places we see his fate. You’ve seen two of the verses already. Take note of the emphasis in bold:

9 **Sheol below** is getting excited over you,
to meet you when you come;

it arouses the **dead spirits** for you,
all of the leaders of the earth.
It raises all of the kings of the nations from their thrones....

12 “How you have fallen from heaven,
morningstar, son of dawn!
You are **cut down to the ground** [*’erets*]....

15 But you are **brought down to Sheol**,
to the **depths of the pit** (*Isa 14:9, 12, 15*).

The punishment of *helel* is to live in the realm of the dead. *Helel* ends up in Sheol, the pit (*bor*); brought down to earth (*’erets*) by God, the truly Most High.

The table below expands on the one we began in the previous chapter. As we move forward, I’ll add terms and verses to those from Ezekiel 28. I’ll focus on divine council connections between that chapter and Isaiah 14 and Genesis 3, but will include references from elsewhere when appropriate.

THE DIVINE COUNCIL CONTEXT			
Hebrew Term	English Meaning	Concept	Important Verses
<i>elim, elohim</i> (plural)	“gods”	council members	Gen 3:5, 22 ; Psa 82:1, 6 ; Ezek 28:2
<i>beney elim</i> <i>beney elohim</i> <i>kokebey boqer</i> <i>kokebey el</i> <i>helel ben-shachar</i>	“sons of God” “morning stars” “stars of God” “shining one, son of the dawn”	council members shining appearance	Job 38:7 ; Pss 29:1 ; 89:6 ; Isa 14:13 ; Ezek 28:13 (gems)
<i>gan</i>	“garden”	divine abode, council meeting place	Gen 2:8–10, 15–16 Gen 3:1–3, 8, 10, 23–24 Ezek 28:13
<i>’ed</i> <i>nahar</i> <i>yamim</i>	“(watery) mist” “river” “seas, waters”	description of the well-watered garden of the council	Gen 2:6, 10–14 (Zion); Ezek 47:1–12 (Jerusalem temple; cf. Zech 14:8); Ezek 28:2
<i>tsaphon</i> <i>yarketey tsaphon</i> <i>bamot</i>	“north” “heights of the north” “heights”	mountain range where divine council met	Psa 48:1–2 (Jerusalem temple; cf. Ezek 40:2); Isa 14:13–14
<i>har</i>	“mount, mountain”	mountain range where divine council met	Exod 24:15 (Sinai; cf. Psa 68:15–17 ; Deut 33:1–2); Isa 14:13 ; 27:13 (Zion); Ezek 47:1–12 (Jerusalem temple)
<i>adat</i> <i>sod</i> <i>mo’ed</i> <i>moshab</i>	“assembly” “council” “meeting” “seat” (governing)	the divine assembly	Pss 82:1 ; 89:7 ; Isa 14:13 ; Ezek 28:2

THE NACHASH OF GENESIS 3

The pivotal character of Genesis 3 is the serpent. The Hebrew word translated *serpent* is *nachash*. The word is both plain and elastic.

The most straightforward meaning is the one virtually all translators and interpreters opt for:

serpent. When the Hebrew root letters *n-ch-sh* are a noun, that's the meaning.

But *n-ch-sh* are also the consonants of a verb. If we changed the vowels to a verbal form (recall that Hebrew originally had no vowels), we would have *nochesh*, which means “the diviner.” Divination refers to communication with the supernatural world. A diviner in the ancient world was one who foretold omens or gave out divine information (oracles). We can see that element in the story. Eve is getting information from this being.

The consonants *n-ch-sh* may also form an alternative noun, *nachash*, which is at times used descriptively, like an adjective. This term is used in place names outside the Bible and once within the Old Testament. [First Chronicles 4:12](#) refers to “Tehinnah, father of *Ir-Nachash*.” The otherwise unknown Tehinnah is regarded in this verse as the founder of the city (Hebrew: *ir*) of *nachash*.

This city has yet to be securely identified by archaeologists. The phrase means “the city of copper/bronze (smiths).” Hebrew words like *nechosheth* (“bronze”; “copper”) are derived from this noun. *Ir-nachash* was a place known for copper and bronze metallurgy. The option is interesting because copper and bronze are *shiny* when polished. In fact, the Old Testament uses *nechosheth* to describe divine beings ([Dan 10:6](#)).

We have words with such elasticity in English, where meaning depends on the part of speech. For example:

(Noun): “*Running* is a good form of exercise.”

(Verb): “The engine is *running* on diesel.”

(Adjective): “*Running* paint is an eyesore.”

Sometimes writers, when they use a term, want their readers to think about *all* possible meanings and nuances. If I ask, “How has your reading been?” the reader is forced to think about all three. Do I mean the latest assignment (noun)? Am I wondering if you got the right glasses (adjective)? Or am I referencing the process (verb)? What I’m suggesting is that, since there are immediate clues in the story that the serpent is more than a mere snake, that he may be a *divine* adversary, the term *nachash* is a triple entendre. The writer wants his readers to consider all the possible nuances in their interpretive, intellectual experience. All of them carry theological weight.²

The serpent (*nachash*) was an image commonly used in reference to a divine throne guardian. Given the context of Eden, that helps identify the villain as a divine being. The divine adversary dispenses divine information, using it to goad Eve. He gives her an oracle (or, an omen!): You won’t really die. God knows when you eat you will be like one of the *elohim*. Lastly, a shining appearance conveys a divine nature. All the meanings telegraph something important. They are also consistent with the imagery from Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28.

DIVINE JUDGMENT

I tend to be sympathetic toward Eve. She all too often gets cast as stupid and naïve. Given the divine council context of her status as God’s imager and new member of his family, what the *nachash* said to her had the ring of validity. Of course God wants us to be like the *elohim*—we’re all one family. We all represent the creator, don’t we? Why would we die?

This doesn't excuse Eve (or Adam). Their disobedience had dire consequences. But while the reason for God's judgment is transparent, the meanings of that judgment beg for some careful thought. Entire books have been written on the implications of God's response, so my thoughts will be very selective.³

The curse levied at Adam ([Gen 3:17–19](#)) did not supersede God's mandate to subdue the earth and take dominion. But it did make the task harder. The expulsion of humankind from Eden ([Gen 3:22–25](#)) turned a glorious dominion mission into mundane drudgery. We know that God would take steps to restore his rule, and that descendants of Adam (especially one of them—[Gen 3:15](#)) would be critical to that kingdom. The human yearning for utopia is interesting in this light. We seem to have an inner sense of need to restore something that was lost, but Eden cannot return on purely human terms.⁴

God's judgment of Eve is in some sense entwined with the curse of the *nachash*. Eve would suffer intensified pain in childbirth ([Gen 3:16](#): "I will *multiply* your pain."). There is no indication that, had she borne children before the fall, Eve would have felt no pain at all. She was human. And it was important that she bear children, since her childbearing would have some relationship to the destiny of the *nachash* and his deed.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel ([Gen 3:15](#) ESV).

The wording of [Gen 3:15](#) is veiled. For reasons that I'll make clear later, I believe prophecies like this that ultimately move in a messianic direction were deliberately cryptic. At the very least the verse tells us that God was not done with humanity yet. The goal of his rule on earth *through humanity* would not be abandoned. A descendant of Eve would come forth who would someday undo the damage caused by the divine rebel, the *nachash*. That this descendant is linked to Eve implies that the score will be settled through her bloodline.

This human threat to the *nachash* is fitting. The seduction to sin meant that Yahweh would have to be true to his word and eliminate humanity. The *nachash* counted on the justice of God to eliminate his rivals. God was just in this regard. Elimination from Eden did indeed mean death, but not in the sense of immediate annihilation. God would see to it that their lives ended, but not before continuing his plan. Humanity would die, but it would also, at some point, produce a descendant who would ultimately restore God's Edenic vision and destroy the *nachash*.

Adam and Eve had contingent immortality prior to the fall. They had never-ending life, depending on certain circumstances. The imagery of Eden, home of the life-giver, and its tree of life convey the notion that, so long as Adam and Eve ate from the tree of life, called Eden their home, and didn't do anything that resulted in mortal injury (they were truly human after all), they would live.⁵ Protected in their perfect environment, they could multiply and carry out their tasks as God's representatives on earth until the job was done.

All of that goes by the wayside once they are removed from Eden. God even takes the extra step of preventing them from returning to Eden's tree of life ([Gen 3:24](#)). Had they access to it, they would have gone on living, despite what had happened. After the fall, the only way to extend the work of God's human council-family was childbirth. Eve was redeemed through childbearing ([1 Tim 2:15](#)).

So were the rest of us, in the sense that that is the only way God’s original plan remained viable. Where there are no offspring, there can be no human imaging and no kingdom.

But the judgment on Eve also tells us that the *nachash* would have offspring as well. The rest of the biblical story doesn’t consist of humans battling snake people. That’s no surprise, since the enemy of humanity wasn’t a mere snake. The Bible does, however, describe an ongoing conflict between followers of Yahweh and human and divine beings who follow the spiritual path of the *nachash*. All who oppose God’s kingdom plan are the seed of the *nachash*.

Many readers who still feel the urge to see only a snake in Eden would no doubt contend that the curse pronounced on the *nachash* requires that. I disagree. Literal readings are inadequate to convey the full theological messaging and the entirety of the worldview context.

Consider what happens to the *nachash* against the backdrop of the judgment language found in Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14:

SERPENT/SHINING ONE IMAGERY & PUNISHMENT			
Hebrew Term	English Meaning	Concept	Important Verses
<i>nachash</i>	“serpent” (noun) “to use divination, give omens” (verb) “bronze, brazen” (adj)	word play; triple entendre Image of serpent (divine throne guardian), information from divine realm (divination), shining appearance associated with divinity (brazen)	Gen 3:1–2, 4, 13–14
<i>chawwat</i>	“serpent”		Ezek 28:12 (with silent <i>m</i>)
<i>helel</i> <i>ben-shachar</i>	“shining one, son of the dawn”	shining appearance associated with divinity	Isa 14:12 Ezek 28:13 (gems)
<i>yarad</i> <i>gada’</i> <i>shalak</i>	“brought down” “cut down” “cast down”	an expulsion from the divine presence and former service role to Yahweh ⁶	Ezek 28:8, 17 Isa 14:11–12, 15
<i>’erets</i>	“earth, ground” (abstractly): underworld realm of the dead	underworld, realm of the dead <i>NOTE:</i> the <i>nachash</i> of Gen 3 is made to crawl on his belly, put on the ground, under the feet of animals (Gen 3:14)	Ezek 28:17 Isa 14:9, 11–12, 15
<i>sheol</i>	Sheol; realm of the dead		
<i>rephaim</i>	Rephaim; the “shades”; the dead in the underworld	underworld occupants	Ezek 28:17 Isa 14:9
<i>m^elakim</i>	“kings” (fallen enemies)		

The *nachash* was cursed to crawl on its belly, imagery that conveyed being *cast down* ([Ezek 28:8, 17](#); [Isa 14:11–12, 15](#)) to the ground. In Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14, we saw the villain cast down to the *’erets*, a term that refers literally to the dirt and metaphorically to the underworld ([Ezek 28:17](#); [Isa 14:9, 11–12, 15](#)). The curse also had him “eating dirt,” clearly a metaphorical reference, since snakes don’t really eat dirt as food for nutrition. It isn’t part of the “natural snake diet.” The point being made by the curse is that the *nachash*, who wanted to be “most high,” will be “most low” instead—cast away from God and the council to earth, and even under the earth. In the underworld, the *nachash* is even lower than the beasts of the field. He is hidden from view and from life in God’s world. His domain is death.

After the fall, though humankind was estranged from God and no longer immortal, the plan of God was not extinguished. Genesis 3 tells us why we die, why we need redemption and salvation, and

why we cannot save ourselves. It also tells us that God's plan has only been delayed—not defeated—and that the human story will be both a tragic struggle and a miraculous, providential saga.

But the situation is going to get worse before it gets better.

Divine Transgression

AFTER THE RUINATION OF EDEN, THE HUMAN STORY HEADS SOUTH IN A hurry. That's to be expected. The curses that followed the events in the garden bound the fate of humanity together with the seed of the *nachash*, all those who oppose the rule of God in either the earthly or the spiritual realm. The rule of God known as Eden would disappear, kept alive only through a fledgling humanity to whom God extended mercy.

The seed of the *nachash* is therefore literal (people and divine beings are real) and spiritual (the lineage is one of spiritual rebellion). This description has secure biblical roots. Jesus told the Pharisees, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” ([John 8:44](#)), and called them “serpents” and “offspring of vipers” ([Matt 23:33](#)). In 1 John 3 the apostle John expressed the notion of spiritual seed—good or evil—manifesting itself in the human heart when he wrote:

⁸ The one who practices sin is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this reason the Son of God was revealed: in order to destroy the works of the devil.

⁹ Everyone who is fathered by God does not practice sin, because his seed resides in him, and he is not able to sin, because he has been fathered by God. ¹⁰ By this the children of God and the children of the devil are evident: everyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, namely, the one who does not love his brother.

¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning: that we should love one another, ¹² not as Cain, who was of the evil one and violently murdered his brother. And for what reason did he violently murder him? Because his deeds were evil and the deeds of his brother were righteous ([1 John 3:8–12](#)).

This passage describes people whose lives are characterized by wickedness as “children of the devil,” a contrast to the spiritual “children of God.” This is a spiritual lineage, since the children of God have “God’s seed” abiding in them, a reference to the Holy Spirit. Peter echoes the same thought in [1 Peter 1:23](#), where he describes those born again (literally, born “from above”) as being born not as mortal offspring or seed, but of “imperishable seed,” through the word of God. The language, then, points toward the spiritual—following Yahweh or following the example of the original rebel, the *nachash*.

Interestingly, John mentions Cain specifically. Cain murdered Abel sometime after their parents were expelled from Eden, the point at which we’ve arrived in our exploration. Cain’s spiritual father was the *nachash*. They walked the same path.

Things eventually got so bad that in [Genesis 6:5](#) we read, “And Yahweh saw that the evil of humankind *was* great upon the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was always only evil.” But that verdict is preceded by four verses that describe a different kind of rebellion—a divine one. There were those in that realm who, as the *nachash* had done, made a free choice that violated God’s design and strategy for his rule on earth.

In what remains of this chapter, we'll take a closer look at this divine transgression, focusing on how the account has been stripped of its supernatural features—and therefore its intended meaning—by most Christian interpreters. We'll continue the discussion in the two chapters that follow, where we'll examine how the original context and intent of the passage compels a supernatural interpretation and then explore that interpretation's implications.

PRECURSOR TO THE FLOOD: DIVINE REBELLION

[Genesis 6:1–4](#) is one of those texts that many readers and pastors would rather skip. Not here. Its theological message is important.

¹ And it happened that, when humankind began to multiply on the face of the ground, daughters were born to them. ² Then the sons of God saw the daughters of humankind, that they were beautiful. And they took for themselves wives from all that they chose. ³ And Yahweh said, “My Spirit shall not abide with humankind forever in that he is also flesh. And his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” ⁴ The Nephilim were upon the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God went into the daughters of humankind, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty warriors that were from ancient times, men of renown.

There are few Bible passages that raise as many questions as this one. ¹ Who are the sons of God? Are they divine or human? Who were the Nephilim? How do these verses relate to the human evil described in [Genesis 6:5](#)?

Before we start tackling these questions and others, ² we need to learn how *not* to interpret this passage.

THE SETHITE INTERPRETATION

This interpretation of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) is the one most commonly taught in Christian churches, evangelical or otherwise. It has been the dominant Christian position since the late fourth century AD. ³

In this approach, the sons of God in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) are merely human beings, men from the line of Seth, Adam and Eve's son who was born after Cain murdered Abel ([Gen 4:25–26](#); [5:3–4](#)). Presumably, these four verses describe forbidden intermarriage between the godly men of Seth's lineage (“sons of God”) and the ungodly women of Cain's line (“daughters of humankind”). In this reading, everyone who lived on earth ultimately came from these two lines, both of them lines descended from Adam and Eve's children. ⁴ In this way, the Bible distinguished the godly from the ungodly. Part of the rationale for this view comes from [Genesis 4:26](#), where, depending on the translation, we read that either Seth or humankind “began to call on the name of the Lord” (NIV). ⁵ The line of Seth was to remain pure and separate from evil lineage. The marriages of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) erased this separation and incurred the wrath of God in the flood.

Exposing the deficiencies of the Sethite view isn't difficult. The position is deeply flawed.

First, [Genesis 4:26](#) never says the *only* people who “called on the name of the Lord” were men from Seth's lineage. That idea is imposed on the text. Second, as we'll see in the next chapter, the view fails miserably in explaining the Nephilim. Third, the text never calls the women in the episode

“daughters of Cain.” Rather, they are “daughters of humankind.” There is no actual link in the text to Cain. This means that the Sethite view of the text is supported by something *not* present in the text, which is the very antithesis of exegesis. Fourth, there is no command in the text regarding marriages or any prohibition against marrying certain persons. There are no “Jews and Gentiles” at this time.⁶ Fifth, nothing in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) or anywhere else in the Bible identifies people who come from Seth’s lineage with the descriptive phrase “sons of God.” That connection is purely an assumption through which the story is filtered by those who hold the Sethite view.

A close reading of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) makes it clear that a contrast is being created between two classes of individuals, one human and the other divine. When speaking of how humanity was multiplying on earth (v. 1), the text mentions only daughters (“daughters were born to them”). The point is not literally that every birth in the history of the earth after Cain and Abel resulted in a girl.⁷ Rather, the writer is setting up a contrast of two groups. The first group is human and female (the “daughters of humankind”). Verse 2 introduces the other group for the contrast: the sons of God. That group is not human, but divine.

There are more deficiencies in this viewpoint than I will take time here to expose, but the point is evident. The Sethite hypothesis collapses under the weight of its own incoherence.

DIVINIZED HUMAN RULERS

Another approach that argues the “sons of God” in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) are human suggests that they should be understood as divinized human rulers. A survey of the academic literature arguing this perspective reveals that it springs from the following: (1) taking the phrase “sons of the Most High” in [Psalm 82:6](#) as referring to humans, then reading that back into [Genesis 6:1–4](#); (2) noting language where God refers to humans as his sons ([Exod 4:23](#); [Psa 2:7](#)), which, it is argued, is parallel to ancient Near Eastern beliefs that kings were thought to be divine offspring; and (3) arguing that the evil marriages condemned in the verses were human polygamy on the part of these divinized rulers.

We have already seen how the human view of the plural *elohim* language in Psalm 82 fails, so that fundamental flaw need not be reiterated here. But there are other flaws in this approach.

First, the text of Genesis 6 never says the marriages were polygamous. That idea must be read into the passage. Second, ancient parallels restrict divine sonship language to kings. Consequently, the idea of a *group* of sons of God lacks a coherent ancient Near Eastern parallel. The precise plural phrase refers to divine beings elsewhere in the Old Testament, not kings ([Job 1:6](#); [2:1](#); [38:7](#); [Pss 29:1](#); [82:6](#) [cf. [82:1b](#)]; [89:6](#) [Hebrew: [89:7](#)]).⁸ Third, the broad idea of “human divine kingship” elsewhere in the Old Testament is not a coherent argument against a supernatural view of Genesis 6. It was God’s original design for his human children to be servant rulers over the earth under his authority as his representatives—in the presence of his glory. Restoring the loss of the Edenic vision eventually involves creating a people known as Israel and giving them a king (David), who is the template for messiah. In the final eschatological outcome, the messiah is the ultimate Davidic king, and all *glorified* believers share that rule in a new, global Eden.⁹ But it is flawed hermeneutics to read either ancient kingship or the glorification of believers back into Genesis 6. The reason is obvious: the marriages in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) corrupt the earth in the prelude to the flood story. A biblical theology of divinized human rulership in the restored Eden would not be corruptive and evil.

In summary, the plurality of the phrase “sons of God” and the heavenly contexts of its use

elsewhere show us there is no *exegetical* reason to exclude the occurrences of the phrase in [Genesis 6:2, 4](#) from the list of supernatural beings. What drives this choice is apprehension about the alternative.

PETER AND JUDE

Peter and Jude did not fear the alternative. They embraced a supernatural view of [Genesis 6:1–4](#). Two passages are especially relevant.

¹ But there were also false prophets among the people ... ³ And in greediness they will exploit you with false words, whose condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. ⁴ For if God did not spare **the angels who sinned, but held them captive in Tartarus with chains of darkness and handed them over to be kept for judgment,** ⁵ and did not spare **the ancient world, but preserved Noah,** a proclaimer of righteousness, and seven others when he brought a flood on the world of the ungodly, ⁶ and condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction, reducing them to ashes, having appointed them as an example for those who are going to be ungodly, ⁷ and rescued righteous Lot, worn down by the way of life of lawless persons in licentiousness ⁸ (for that righteous man, as he lived among them day after day, was tormenting his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he was seeing and hearing), ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to reserve the unrighteous to be punished at the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and **especially those who go after the flesh in defiling lust and who despise authority** ([2 Peter 2:1–10](#)).

⁵ Now I want to remind you, although you know everything once and for all, that Jesus, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, the second time destroyed those who did not believe.

⁶ And **the angels who did not keep to their own domain but deserted their proper dwelling place, he has kept in eternal bonds under deep gloom for the judgment of the great day,** ⁷ as Sodom and Gomorrah and the towns around them indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire **in the same way as these,** are exhibited as an example by undergoing the punishment of eternal fire ([Jude 5–7](#)).

Scholars agree that the passages are about the same subject matter. ¹⁰ They describe an episode from the time of Noah and the flood where “angels” sinned. ¹¹ That sin, which precipitated the flood, was sexual in nature; it is placed in the same category as the sin which prompted the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. The transgression was interpreted by Peter and Jude as evidence of despising authority and the boundaries of “proper dwelling” for the parties concerned. All of those elements are transparent in [Genesis 6:1–4](#). There is simply no other sin in the Old Testament that meets these specific details—and no other “angelic” sin *at all* in the Old Testament that might be the referent. ¹²

The punishment for the transgression, however, is not mentioned in [Genesis 6:1–4](#). Peter has the divine sons of God held captive in “Tartarus” in chains of darkness until a time of judgment. ¹³ Jude echoes the thought and clarifies the judgment as the day of the Lord (“the great day”; cf. [Zeph 1:1–7](#); [Rev 16:14](#)). These elements come from Jewish literature written between our Old and New Testaments (the “Second Temple” period) that retell the Genesis 6 episode. The most famous of these

is 1 Enoch. That book informed the thinking of Peter and Jude; it was part of their intellectual worldview.¹⁴ The inspired New Testament writers were perfectly comfortable referencing content found in 1 Enoch and other Jewish books to articulate their theology.¹⁵

These observations are important. All Jewish traditions before the New Testament era took a supernatural view of [Genesis 6:1–4](#).¹⁶ In other words, they were in line with 2 Peter and Jude. The interpretation of the passage, at least with respect to its supernatural orientation, was not an issue until the late fourth century AD, when it fell out of favor with some influential church fathers, especially Augustine.

But biblical theology does not derive from the church fathers. It derives from the biblical text, framed in its own context. Scholars agree that the Second Temple Jewish literature that influenced Peter and Jude shows intimate familiarity with the original Mesopotamian context of [Genesis 6:1–4](#).¹⁷ For the person who considers the Old and New Testament to be equally inspired, interpreting [Genesis 6:1–4](#) “in context” means analyzing it in light of its Mesopotamian background as well as 2 Peter and Jude, whose content utilizes supernatural interpretations from Jewish theology of their own day. Filtering [Genesis 6:1–4](#) through Christian tradition that arose centuries after the New Testament period cannot honestly be considered interpreting [Genesis 6:1–4](#) in context.

Our next step is to build on what we’ve learned. In the next chapter, we’ll take a closer look at how the ancient contexts of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) demand a supernatural outlook for the passage. Doing so will enable us to understand its message and role in the larger biblical narrative.

The Bad Seed

IN THE LAST CHAPTER WE LEARNED THAT NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS PAR-took of the intellectual climate of their own Jewish community, a community that flourished in the period between the Old and New Testament. It might seem unnecessary to mention this, given the enthusiasm many Bible readers have today for tapping into the Jewish mind to understand the words of Jesus and the apostles. When it comes to [Genesis 6:1–4](#), though, that enthusiasm often sours, since the result doesn't support the most comfortable modern Christian interpretation.

The truth is that the writers of the New Testament knew nothing of the Sethite view, nor of any view that makes the sons of God in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) humans. Our goal in this chapter is to revisit the passage and dig deeper. When we take it on its own terms, we can determine its character and meaning.

THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

That Genesis 1–11 has many connections to Mesopotamian literature is not disputed by scholars, evangelical or otherwise. The story of creation, the genealogies before the flood, the flood itself, and the tower of Babel incident all have secure connections to Mesopotamian material that is much older than the Old Testament.¹

[Genesis 6:1–4](#), too, has deep Mesopotamian roots that, until very recently, have not been fully recognized or appreciated.² Jewish literature like 1 Enoch that retold the story shows a keen awareness of that Mesopotamian context. This awareness shows us that Jewish thinkers of the Second Temple period understood, correctly, that the story involved divine beings and giant offspring.³ That understanding is essential to grasping what the biblical writers were trying to communicate.

[Genesis 6:1–4](#) is a polemic; it is a literary and theological effort to undermine the credibility of Mesopotamian gods and other aspects of that culture's worldview. Biblical writers do this frequently. The strategy often involves borrowing lines and motifs from the literature of the target civilization to articulate correct theology about Yahweh and to show contempt for other gods. [Genesis 6:1–4](#) is a case study in this technique.

Mesopotamia had several versions of the story of a catastrophic flood, complete with a large boat that saves animals and humans.⁴ They include mention of a group of sages (the *apkallus*), possessors of great knowledge, in the period before the flood. These *apkallus* were divine beings. Many *apkallus* were considered evil; those *apkallus* are integral to Mesopotamian demonology. After the flood, offspring of the *apkallus* were said to be human in descent (i.e., having a human parent) and “two-thirds *apkallu*.”⁵ In other words, the *apkallus* mated with human women and produced quasi-divine offspring.

The parallels to [Genesis 6:1–4](#) are impossible to miss. The “two-thirds divine” description is especially noteworthy, since it precisely matches the description of the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh. Recent critical work on the cuneiform tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has revealed that

Gilgamesh was considered a giant who retained knowledge from before the flood.⁶

Other connections: In the Mesopotamian flood story found in a text now known as the *Erra Epic*, the Babylonian high god Marduk punishes the evil *apkallus* with banishment to the subterranean waters deep inside the earth, which were known as Apsu.⁷ The Apsu was also considered part of the underworld.⁸ Marduk commanded that they never come up again. The parallels are clear and unmistakable. The banishment of these sinister divine beings to beneath the earth is significant. In the last chapter, I noted that this element of the story, found in 2 Peter and Jude, is not found in the Old Testament. The presence of this item in books like 1 Enoch and, subsequently, in the New Testament, is a clear indication that Jewish writers between the testaments were aware of the Mesopotamian context of [Genesis 6:1–4](#).⁹

There are two other features to highlight in our discussion before we discuss what it all means.

THE SONS OF GOD:

Watchers, Sons of Heaven, Holy Ones

The divine transgression before the flood is retold in several Jewish texts from the intertestamental period. At least one has the divine offenders coming to earth to “fix” the mess that was humankind—to provide direction and leadership through their knowledge. They were trying to help, but once they had assumed flesh, they failed to resist its urges.¹⁰ The more common version of events, one with a more sinister flavor, is found in 1 Enoch 6–11. This is the reading that informed Peter and Jude. The story begins very much like Genesis 6:

And when the sons of men had multiplied, in those days, beautiful and comely daughters were born to them. And the watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them. And they said to one another, “Come, let us choose for ourselves wives from the daughters of men, and let us beget for ourselves children.”

The account has the Watchers descending to Mount Hermon, a site that will factor into the biblical epic in unexpected ways. *Watcher*, the English translation of Aramaic *’ir*, is not new to us. In an earlier chapter about how God and his council participate together in decision making, we looked at part of Daniel 4, one of the sections of Daniel written in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Daniel 4 is the only biblical passage to specifically use the term *watcher* to describe the divine “holy ones” of Yahweh’s council.¹¹ The geographical context of Daniel is of course Babylon ([Dan 1:1–7](#)), which is in Mesopotamia.

The offspring of the Watchers (sons of God) in 1 Enoch were giants (1 Enoch 7). Some fragments of 1 Enoch among the Dead Sea Scrolls give names for some of the giants. Other texts that retell the story and are thus related to 1 Enoch do the same. The most startling of these is known today by scholars as *The Book of Giants*. It exists only in fragments, but names of several giants, offspring of the Watchers, have survived. One of the names is Gilgamesh, the main character of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹²

Figurines of *apkallus*, the Mesopotamian counterparts to the sons of God, are known through the work of Mesopotamian archaeologists. They were buried in rows of boxes as parts of foundation walls for Mesopotamian buildings to ward off evil powers.¹³ These boxes were referred to by

Mesopotamians as *mats-tsarey*, which means “watchers.”¹⁴ The connection is explicit and direct.

THE NEPHILIM

One of the great debates over [Genesis 6:1–4](#) is the meaning of the word *nephilim*. We’ve seen from the Mesopotamian context that the *apkallus* were divine, mated with human women, and produced giant offspring. We’ve also seen that Jewish thinkers in the Second Temple period viewed the offspring of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) in the same way—as giants. Any analysis of the term *nephilim* must account for, not ignore or violate, these contexts.

Interpretation of the term *nephilim* must also account for another Jewish phenomenon between the testaments—translation of the Old Testament into Greek. I speak here of the Septuagint. The word *nephilim* occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible ([Gen 6:4](#); [Num 13:33](#)). In both cases the Septuagint translated the term with *gigas* (“giant”).¹⁵

Given the backdrop we’ve covered, it would seem obvious that *nephilim* ought to be understood as “giants.” But many commentators resist the rendering, arguing that it should be read as “fallen ones” or “those who fall upon” (a battle expression). These options are based on the idea that the word derives from the Hebrew verb *n-p-l* (*naphal*, “to fall”). More importantly, those who argue that *nephilim* should be translated with one of these expressions rather than “giants” do so to avoid the quasi-divine nature of the Nephilim. That in turn makes it easier for them to argue that the sons of God were human.

In reality, it doesn’t matter whether “fallen ones” is the translation. In both the Mesopotamian context and the context of later Second Temple Jewish thought, their fathers are divine and the *nephilim* (however translated) *are still described as giants*.¹⁶ Consequently, insisting that the name means “fallen” produces no argument to counter a supernatural interpretation.

Despite the uselessness of the argument, I’m not inclined to concede the point. I don’t think *nephilim* means “fallen ones.”¹⁷ Jewish writers and translators habitually think “giants” when they use or translate the term. I think there’s a reason for that.

Explaining my own view of what the term means involves Hebrew morphology, the way words are spelled or formed in Hebrew. Since that discussion gets technical very quickly, I’ve elected to put those details elsewhere, at least for the most part.¹⁸ But since I don’t like to leave questions unanswered, we need to devote some attention to it here.

The spelling of the word *nephilim* provides a clue to what root word the term is derived from. *Nephilim* is spelled two different ways in the Hebrew Bible: *nephilim* and *nephiylim*. The difference between them is the “y” in the second spelling. Hebrew originally had no vowels. All words were written with consonants only. As time went on, Hebrew scribes started to use some of the consonants to mark long vowel sounds. English does this with the “y” consonant—sometimes it’s a vowel. Hebrew does that with its “y” letter, too (the *yod*).

The takeaway is that the second spelling (*nephiylim*) tells us that the root behind the term had a long-i (y) in it before the plural ending (*-im*) was added. That in turn helps us determine that the word does not mean “those who fall.” If that were the case, the word would have been spelled *nophelim*. A translation of “fallen” from the verb *naphal* is also weakened by the “y” spelling form. If the word

came from the verb *naphal*, we'd expect a spelling of *nephulim* for “fallen.”

However, there's another possible defense for the meaning “fallen.” Instead of coming from the verb *naphal*, the word might come from a noun that has a long-i vowel in the second syllable. This kind of noun is called a *qatiyl* noun. Although there is no such noun as *naphiyl* in the Hebrew Bible, the hypothetical plural form would be *nephiylim*, which is the long spelling we see in [Numbers 13:33](#).

This option solves the spelling problem, but it fails to explain everything else: the Mesopotamian context, the Second Temple Jewish recognition of that context, the connection of the term to Anakim giants ([Num 13:33](#); Deut 2–3), and the fact that the Septuagint translators interpreted the word as “giants.”

So where does the spelling *nephiylim* come from? Is there an answer that would simultaneously explain why the translators were consistently thinking “giants”?

There is indeed.

Recall that the Old Testament tells us that Jewish intellectuals were taken to Babylon. During those seventy years, the Jews learned to speak Aramaic. They later brought it back to Judah. This is how Aramaic became the primary language in Judea by the time of Jesus.

The point of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) was to express contempt for the divine Mesopotamian *apkallus* and their giant offspring. Biblical writers had an easy choice of vocabulary for divine beings: sons of God. Their readers would know that the phrase pointed to divine beings, and other passages in the Torah ([Deut 32:17](#)) labeled other divine beings as demons (*shedim*). But these writers needed a good word to villainize the giant offspring. “Fallen ones” doesn't telegraph giantism, so that didn't help them make the point.

My view is that, to solve this messaging problem, the Jewish scribes adopted an Aramaic noun: *naphiyla*—which means “giant.” When you import that word and pluralize it for Hebrew, you get *nephiylim*, just what we see in [Numbers 13:33](#). This is the only explanation to the meaning of the word that accounts for all the contexts and all the details.

THE STRATEGY OF GENESIS 6

But what does it all mean? Why is [Genesis 6:1–4](#) in the Bible? What was its theological message? I've already noted that the goal was polemic—a dismissal of Mesopotamian religion. But that's a little vague. Let's explore it.

Because the content of Genesis 1–11 has so many deep, specific touch-points with Mesopotamian literary works, many scholars believe that these chapters either were written during the exile in Babylon or were edited at that time.¹⁹ The scribes wanted to make it clear that certain religious ideas about the gods and the world were misguided or false.

Think about the setting. The Jews, followers of Yahweh, were in Babylon, deported against their will by the greatest empire in their known world. Though captives, prophets like Ezekiel (and Jeremiah before him) had told the people that their situation was temporary—that the God of Israel remained the real sovereign. He was fully in control and was the true God. They would be set free and Babylon would crumble. For Jewish scribes, their work during the exile was an opportunity to set the record straight for posterity. And that they did.

Babylonian intellectuals (mostly, the priestly class) presumed that civilization in Mesopotamia before the flood had been handed down by their gods. For that reason, they wanted to connect themselves and their intellectual achievements with knowledge from before the flood. It was their way of claiming that their knowledge and skills were divine and, therefore, superior to those of the nations they had conquered. That in turn meant that the gods of those nations were inferior to the gods of Babylon.

The *apkallus* were the great culture-heroes of preflood knowledge. They were the divine sages of a glorious bygone era. Babylonian kings claimed to be descended from the *apkallus* and other divine figures from before the flood. The collective claim was that glorious Babylonia was the sole possessor of divine knowledge, and that that empire's rule had the approval of the gods.

The biblical writers and later Jews disagreed. They saw Babylonian knowledge as having demonic origins—in large part because the *apkallus* themselves were so intertwined with Mesopotamian demonology. The Babylonian elite taught that the divine knowledge of the *apkallus* had survived the flood through a succeeding postflood generation of *apkallus*—giant, quasi-divine offspring fathered by the original preflood *apkallus*.

The biblical writers took what Babylonians thought was proof of their own divine heritage and told a different story. Yes, there were giants, renowned men, both before and after the flood ([Gen 6:4](#)). But those offspring and their knowledge were not of the true God—they were the result of rebellion against Yahweh by lesser divine beings. [Genesis 6:1–4](#), along with 2 Peter and Jude, portrays Babylon's boast as a horrific transgression and, even worse, the catalyst that spread corruption throughout humankind. [Genesis 6:5](#) is essentially a summary of the *effect* of the transgression. It gets little space—it's a restrained account. The later Second Temple Jewish literature goes after it full bore.

First Enoch 8 goes on to elaborate how certain watchers corrupted humankind by means of forbidden divine knowledge, practices largely drawn from Babylonian sciences, another clear indication that the intellectual context of the story was known to Second Temple authors. Since the Babylonian *apkallus* were considered demonic, it is no mystery why Peter and Jude link the events of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) to false teachers ([2 Pet 2:1–4](#)). While attacking their aberrant knowledge, Peter and Jude evoke the imagery of Genesis 6. False teachers are “licentious” men who indulge in “defiling lusts” ([2 Pet 2:2, 10](#); [Jude 8](#)). Like the divine beings of Genesis 6 who “did not keep to their own domain” ([Jude 6](#)), defecting from the loyal *elohim* of Yahweh's council, false teachers “despise authority” and “blaspheme majestic beings” whom angels dare not rebuke ([2 Pet 2:9–11](#); [Jude 8–10](#)).

Less obvious is the implication of the incident with respect to the promised seed of Eve. The biblical writers draw attention to Noah's blamelessness ([Gen 6:9](#)). Scripture does not specifically exempt Noah and his family from the sinful cohabitation of [Genesis 6:1–4](#), but since the event was so heinous, it would be absurd to presume otherwise.²⁰ As concepts like divine sonship began to appear in the Bible with respect to Yahweh's people Israel ([Exod 4:23](#)), the Israelite king ([Psa 2:7](#)), and, ultimately, the messiah, the theological messaging became important. Noah is in the line of Christ ([Luke 3:36](#); cf. [3:38](#)). At no point could it be claimed that the ultimate seed of Eve, the messianic deliverer, was the son of any *elohim* besides Yahweh.²¹

[Genesis 6:1–4](#) is far from being peripheral in importance. It furthers the theme of conflict between divine rebels (the “seed of the *nachash*”) and humanity that will impede the progress of Eden's

restoration. It is one of two passages in the Old Testament that fundamentally frame the history of Israel as a people and a land. The other one is the subject of the next chapter.

Divine Allotment

THE DIVINE TRANSGRESSIONS OF GENESIS 3 AND 6 ARE PART OF A THEOLOGICAL prelude that frames the rest of the Bible. These two episodes, along with a third we'll cover in this chapter, are core components of the supernatural worldview of ancient Israelites and the Jewish community in which Christianity was born.

Taken together, these episodes are a theological morality tale about the futility and danger of trying to recover Eden on any terms other than those God has set. After Eden, God still intended to dwell with humanity. But there would be opposition. Divine beings in service to Yahweh could defect. Enemies of Yahweh and his rule, from the human to the divine to something in between, lurked over the horizon. Heaven and earth were destined to be reunited, but it would be a titanic struggle.

In the meantime, any effort to recapture God's original intent apart from God's own strategy and will for restoring Eden would end in disaster. There would be no Edenic utopia revived by human beings or other gods. It would be a painful lesson.

FROM THE FLOOD TO BABEL

There are several features of Genesis 6 that an Israelite would have picked up on that informed his reading of other passages in the Torah. Verse 4 is especially noteworthy:

The Nephilim were upon the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God went into the daughters of humankind, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty warriors that were from ancient times, men of renown.

The Nephilim are cast as “mighty warriors” (*gibborim*) and “men of renown”—literally, “men of the name (*shem*).”¹ The terms *gibbor(im)* and *shem* appear in several places in the Old Testament story.²

Immediately after the flood, Nimrod (whose name most likely means “rebellion”) is called a *gibbor*.³ Nimrod is cast as the progenitor of the civilizations of Assyria and Babylon ([Gen 10:6–12](#)). Once again, as with Genesis 6, the Mesopotamian context is transparent. Assyria and Babylon are the two civilizations that will later destroy the dream of the earthly kingdom of God in Israel, dismantling, respectively, the northern kingdom (Israel) and southern kingdom (Judah).

The language is not coincidental. It links Babylon back to Genesis 6 and its divine transgression. The Nimrod description in Genesis 10, in the so-called Table of Nations, is therefore a theological bridge between the violation of [Genesis 6:1–4](#) and the next momentous event in the Torah that will frame the entire story of Israel.⁴

THE TOWER OF BABEL

The famous story of the building of the Tower of Babel is about much more than an ill-fated construction project and language confusion. The episode is at the heart of the Old Testament

worldview. It was at Babylon where people sought to “make a name (*shem*) for themselves” by building a tower that reached to the heavens, the realm of the gods. The city is once again cast as the source of sinister activity and knowledge.

[Genesis 11:1–9](#) reads:

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to each other, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone and they had tar for mortar. ⁴ And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top reaches to the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ Then Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower that humankind was building. ⁶ And Yahweh said, “Behold, they are one people with one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. So now nothing that they intend to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other’s language.” ⁸ So Yahweh scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, for there Yahweh confused the language of the whole earth, and there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

You’ll notice right away that there’s the same sort of “plural exhortation” going on in verse [7](#) as we saw in [Genesis 1:26](#). The verse has Yahweh proclaiming, “Let *us* go down and confuse their language.” As was the case in [Genesis 1:26](#), the plural announcement is followed by the actions of only one being, Yahweh: “So Yahweh scattered them” ([11:8](#)).

It’s at this point that most Bible readers presume there’s nothing more to think about. That’s because other Old Testament passages that speak of this event tend to be omitted from the discussion. The most important of these is [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) (ESV):

⁸ When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he divided mankind,
he fixed the borders of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of God.

⁹ But the LORD’s portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage.

[Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) describes how Yahweh’s dispersal of the nations at Babel resulted in his *disinheriting* those nations as his people. This is the Old Testament equivalent of [Romans 1:18–25](#), a familiar passage wherein God “gave [humankind] over” to their persistent rebellion. The statement in [Deuteronomy 32:9](#) that “the LORD’s [i.e., Yahweh’s] portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage” tips us off that a contrast in affection and ownership is intended. Yahweh in effect decided that the people of the world’s nations were no longer going to be in relationship to him. He would begin anew. He would enter into covenant relationship with a new people that did not yet exist: Israel.

The implications of this decision and this passage are crucial to understanding much of what’s in the Old Testament.⁵

Most English Bibles do not read “according to the number of the sons of God” in [Deuteronomy 32:8](#). Rather, they read “according to the number of the sons of Israel.” The difference derives from disagreements between manuscripts of the Old Testament. “Sons of God” is the correct reading, as is now known from the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁶

Frankly, you don’t need to know all the technical reasons for why the “sons of God” reading in [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) is what the verse originally said. You just need to think a bit about the *wrong* reading, the “sons of Israel.” [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) harks back to events at the Tower of Babel, an event that occurred *before* the call of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. This means that the nations of the earth were divided at Babel *before Israel even existed as a people*. It would make no sense for God to divide up the nations of the earth “according to the number of the sons of Israel” if there was no Israel. This point is also brought home in another way, namely by the fact that Israel is not listed in the Table of Nations.

THE DEUTERONOMY 32 WORLDVIEW

So what happened to the other nations? What does it mean that they were apportioned as an inheritance according to the number of the sons of God?

As odd as it sounds, the rest of the nations were placed under the authority of members of Yahweh’s divine council.⁷ The other nations were assigned to lesser *elohim* as a judgment from the Most High, Yahweh.

That this interpretation is sound is made clear by an explicit parallel passage, [Deuteronomy 4:19–20](#). There Moses says to the Israelites:

¹⁹ And do this so that you do not lift your eyes *toward* heaven and observe the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of the heaven, and be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that Yahweh your God has allotted to all *of* the peoples under all *of* the heaven.²⁰ But Yahweh has taken you and brought you out from the furnace of iron, from Egypt, to be a people of inheritance to him, as it is this day.

[Deuteronomy 4:19–20](#) is the other side of God’s punitive coin. Whereas in [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) God apportioned or handed out the nations to the sons of God, here we are told God “allotted” the gods to those nations. God decreed, in the wake of Babel, that the other nations he had forsaken would have other gods besides himself to worship. It is as though God was saying, “If you don’t want to obey me, I’m not interested in being your god—I’ll match you up with some other god.” Psalm 82, where we started our divine council discussion, echoes this decision. That psalm has Yahweh judging other *elohim*, sons of the Most High, for their corruption in administering the nations. The psalm ends with the psalmist pleading, “Rise up, O God, judge the earth, because you shall inherit all the nations.”

It might seem that God’s response at the tower of Babel incident was overly severe. But consider the context. The point is not that Yahweh was a glorified building inspector.

As we noted in an earlier chapter, gods were perceived to live on mountains. The tower of Babel is regarded by all scholars as one of Mesopotamia’s famous man-made sacred mountains—a ziggurat. Ziggurats were divine abodes, places where Mesopotamians believed heaven and earth intersected.⁸ The nature of this structure makes evident the purpose in building it—to bring the divine down to earth.

The biblical writer wastes no time in linking this act to the earlier divine transgression of [Genesis 6:1–4](#). That passage sought to portray the giant quasi-divine Babylonian culture heroes (the *apkallus*) who survived the flood as “men of renown” or, more literally, “men of the name [*shem*].” Those who built the tower of Babel wanted to do so to “make a name [*shem*]” for themselves. The building of the tower of Babel meant perpetuating Babylonian religious knowledge and substituting the rule of Babel’s gods for rule by Yahweh.

Yahweh would have none of it. After the flood God had commanded humanity once again to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” ([Gen 9:1](#)). These words reiterated the original Edenic intention. But instead of obeying and having Yahweh be their god, the people gathered to build the tower. The theological messaging of the story is clear. Humanity had shunned Yahweh and his plan to restore Eden through them, so he would shun *them* and start again.

While the decision was harsh, the other nations are not *completely* forsaken. Yahweh disinherited the nations, and in the very next chapter of Genesis, he calls Abram out of—you guessed it—Mesopotamia. Again, this is not accidental. Yahweh would take a man from the heart of the rebellion and make a new nation, Israel. But in his covenant with Abram, God said that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abram, through his descendants ([Gen 12:1–3](#)).

The covenant language reveals that it was God’s intention, right on the heels of his decision to punish the nations, that the Israelites would serve as a conduit for their return to the true God. This is one of the reasons Israel is later called “a kingdom of priests” ([Exod 19:6](#)). Israel would be in covenant with “the God of gods” and the “Lord of lords” ([Deut 10:17](#)). Those disinherited would be in spiritual bondage to the corrupt sons of God. But Israel would be a conduit, a mediator. Yahweh would leave a spiritual bread-crumbs trail back to himself. That path would wind through Israel and, ultimately, Israel’s messiah.

From the fateful decision at Babel onward, the story of the Old Testament is about Israel versus the disinherited nations, and Yahweh versus the corrupt, rebel *elohim* of those nations. The division of the nations and their allotment under other *elohim* is behind the scenes in all sorts of places in biblical history. I’ll give you a glimpse of what I mean in the next chapter.

Cosmic Geography

IN THE LAST CHAPTER WE GOT OUR FIRST EXPOSURE TO [DEUTERONOMY 32:8–9](#), Yahweh’s disinheritance of the nations. This was the theological lens through which an ancient Israelite viewed her own nation with respect to all others, and her *elohim*, Yahweh, against the gods of those nations. By definition Yahweh was superior. He was Most High (*elyon*)—the title used in [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#).¹

The Old Testament therefore describes a world where cosmic-geographical lines have been drawn. Israel was holy ground because it was Yahweh’s “inheritance,” in the language of [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#). The territory of other nations belonged to other *elohim* because Yahweh had decreed it. Psalm 82 told us that these lesser *elohim* were corrupt.² We aren’t told how the *elohim* Yahweh assigned to the nations became corrupt, only that they were. It is clear from [Deuteronomy 4:19–20](#); [17:3](#); [29:25](#); and [32:17](#) that these *elohim* were illegitimate for Israelite worship.

This cosmic-geographical perspective explains several odd passages in the Bible, and provides dramatic theological backdrop to others. Some of the most startling are in the New Testament. I’ll hold those until we reach the time of Jesus and the apostles. For now I’ll illustrate the point with some short, but fascinating, examples.

DAVID’S PREDICAMENT

After his anointing by Samuel and victory over Goliath (1 Sam 16–18), David spends a good deal of time trying to escape the blind rage of King Saul. During the time he’s on the run, David occasionally must flee into territory outside the borders of Israel. In one of the episodes where David finds Saul in a vulnerable situation and could have killed his pursuer, we read the following conversation:

¹⁷ Then Saul recognized David’s voice and said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” And David said, “It is my voice, my lord the king.” ¹⁸ Then he said, “Why is my lord pursuing after his servant? For what have I done? And what evil is in my hand? ¹⁹ And so then, please let my lord the king listen to the words of his servant: If Yahweh has incited you against me, may he delight in an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be accursed before Yahweh, for they have driven me away today from sharing in the inheritance of Yahweh, saying, ‘Go, serve other gods!’ ([1 Sam 26:17–19](#)).

One of the points of David’s distress is that he has been driven away “from sharing in the inheritance of Yahweh.” The “inheritance” language is the same as that found in [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#), where Jacob (Israel) is Yahweh’s inheritance, the land and the people Yahweh “took” for himself ([Deut 4:19–20](#)).

Is David ignorant of the fact that the God who made heaven and earth can be anywhere? No. In David’s mind, being driven outside Israel meant not being able to worship Yahweh. Note that he does not complain of being driven from the Ark of the Covenant, located at Kiriath Jearim ([1 Sam 7:2](#)), or

from the Tabernacle, apparently located at Nob (1 Sam 21–22). His complaint is being expelled from the “inheritance” of Yahweh—the holy land of his God. David can’t worship as he should if he is not on holy ground. The lands outside Israel belong to other gods.

NAAMAN ASKS FOR DIRT

Another fascinating story that illustrates the Israelite cosmic-geographical worldview is the story of Naaman, the commander of the army of Syria, a foreign country just beyond Israel’s northern border. Naaman also happened to be afflicted with leprosy.

According to 2 Kings 5, at the suggestion of a captive Israelite servant girl, Naaman decides to seek the prophet Elisha for a cure for his condition. He travels to Israel, but Elisha doesn’t even come out to talk to him in person. He sends a messenger to tell the military hero to wash himself in the Jordan seven times if he wants to be healed. Insulted, Naaman at first resists, then relents at the encouragement of his servants. He does as instructed and emerges cleansed from the skin disease. Naaman returned to the prophet, who this time chose to speak with the Syrian. Picking up the story:

¹⁵ When he returned to the man of God, he and all of his army, he came and stood before him and said, “Please now, I know that there is no God in all of the world except in Israel. So then, please take a gift from your servant.” ¹⁶ And he said, “As Yahweh lives, before whom I stand, I surely will not take it.” Still he urged him to take it, but he refused. ¹⁷ Then Naaman said, “If not, then please let a load of soil on a pair of mules be given to your servants, for your servant will never again bring a burnt offering and sacrifice to other gods, but only to Yahweh. ¹⁸ As far as this matter, may Yahweh pardon your servant when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he is leaning himself on my arm, that I also bow down in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down in the house of Rimmon, may Yahweh please pardon your servant in this matter.” ¹⁹ He said to him, “Go in peace” (2 Kgs 5:15–19).

The brief trip into Israel and the encounter with Yahweh’s prophet have taught Naaman some good theology. He affirms that “there is no God in all of the world except in Israel” (v. 15). From henceforth he will sacrifice only to Yahweh. But how can he keep that vow after returning to Syria? Simple—*he pleads for dirt to take home*. Naaman views the land of Israel as holy ground—it is Yahweh’s territory. Naaman takes as much dirt as his mules can carry so he can worship Yahweh on Yahweh’s own territory, even though Naaman lives in the domain of the god Rimmon.

We aren’t told if Naaman went home and spread dirt on the floor of a room in his home. We don’t know how he handled his duty to accompany his aged king into Rimmon’s temple. Perhaps he carried dirt with him as a pledge of his believing loyalty to Yahweh. What we do know is that the dirt was a theological statement. Dirt from Israel was the means by which Naaman showed his faith and kept his vow to the true God, Yahweh.

DANIEL AND PAUL

Another passage in the Old Testament, Daniel 10, presumes the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. In Daniel 10 we read about a vision of the prophet. Daniel sees a “man” dressed in linen, whom he describes this way:

Now his body was like turquoise, and his face was like the appearance of lightning, and his eyes were like torches of fire, and his arms and his legs were like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words was like the sound of a multitude ([Dan 10:6](#)).

We've seen before that shininess or brilliant luminescence is a stock description for a divine being. The radiant figure, who is never identified in the passage, says to Daniel:

¹² You must not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I myself have come because of your words. ¹³ But the prince of the kingdom of Persia stood before me for twenty-one days. And look, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to assist me, and I left him there beside the king of the Persians. ¹⁴ And I have come to instruct you about what will happen to your people in the future, for there is a further vision here for the future (vv. [12–14](#)).

The figure later adds, before ending the conversation:

²⁰ And now I return to fight against the prince of Persia and I myself am going, and look, the prince of Javan³ will come. ²¹ However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth, and there is not one who contends with me against these beings except Michael, your prince (vv. [20](#) and [21](#)).

Biblical scholars are in unanimous agreement that the “princes” referred to in Daniel 10 are divine beings, not humans. This is transparent from the mention of Michael in [10:13](#) and [10:21](#), who is called “prince” (cf. [Dan 12:1](#)). They are also agreed that the concept is based on [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#).⁴

This passage, along with [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#), is the foundation for Paul’s theology of the unseen world.⁵ This is made clear in an overarching sense in [Acts 17:26–27](#), where Luke records Paul’s speech at the Areopagus. In talking about God’s salvation plan, Paul says:

²⁶ And he [God] made from one *man* every nation of humanity to live on all the face of the earth, determining *their* fixed times and the fixed boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ to search for God, if perhaps indeed they might feel around for him and find *him*. And indeed he is not far away from each one of us ([Acts 17:26–27](#)).

Paul quite clearly alludes to the situation with the nations produced by God’s judgment at Babel, the [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) worldview. God had disinherited the nations as his people and made a new people for himself, Israel, his own “portion” ([Deut 32:9](#)). Immediately after the judgment at Babel ([Gen 11:1–9](#)), God called Abraham for that purpose, initiating a covenant relationship with Abraham and his yet unborn descendants. That covenant relationship included the idea Paul refers to in [Acts 17:27](#), the drawing of the disinherited Gentile nations ([Gen 12:3](#)). Paul’s rationale for his own ministry to the Gentiles was that it was God’s intention to reclaim the nations to restore the original Edenic vision.⁶ Every person in every nation was given the opportunity to repent and believe in the risen Christ ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Salvation was not only for the physical children of Abraham, but for anyone who would believe ([Gal 3:26–29](#)).

More pointedly, Paul’s terminology for the powers of darkness reflects the cosmic-geographical worldview arising from [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#). The Hebrew word for “prince” used throughout Daniel

10 is *sar*. In [Daniel 10:13](#), where Michael is called “one of the chief princes,” the Septuagint refers to Michael as one of the chief *archonton*.⁷ In another Greek translation of Daniel, a text many scholars consider even older than the Septuagint currently in use, the prince of Persia and Israel’s prince, Michael, are both described with the Greek word *archon*.⁸ These are the terms Paul uses when describing the “rulers of this age” ([1 Cor 2:6, 8](#)), the rulers “in heavenly places” ([Eph 3:10](#)) and “the ruler of the authority of the air” ([Eph 2:2](#)).

Paul often interchanged these terms with others that are familiar to most Bible students:

- “principalities” (*arche*)
- “powers”/“authorities” (*exousia*)
- “powers” (*dynamis*)
- “dominions”/“lords” (*kyrios*)
- “thrones” (*thronos*)

These terms have something in common—they were used in both the New Testament and other Greek literature for *geographical domain rulership*. This is the divine dominion concept of [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#). At times these terms are used of humans, but several instances demonstrate that Paul had spiritual beings in mind.

The first three terms are found in [Ephesians 6:12](#) (“Our struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places”). Paul tells us in [Ephesians 1:20–21](#) that when God raised Jesus from the dead, “he seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (ESV). It was only after Christ had risen that God’s plan was “made known ... to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” ([Eph 3:10](#)). These cosmic forces are “the rulers and the authorities” disarmed and put to shame by the cross ([Col 2:15](#)).

The incident at Babel and God’s decision to disinherit the nations drew up the battle lines for a cosmic turf war for the planet. The corruption of the *elohim* sons of God set over the nations meant that Yahweh’s vision of a global Eden would be met with divine force. Every inch outside Israel would be contested, and Israel itself was fair game for hostile conquest. The gods would not surrender their inheritances back to Yahweh; he would have to reclaim them. God would take the first step in that campaign immediately after Babel.

Section Summary

God's plan that all the earth be Eden came to a screeching halt almost as soon as it began. The *nachash* arrogantly sought to be the Most High. His transgression succeeded in undermining the fulfillment of God's original intention for humanity but failed to result in human destruction. The rebel inserted himself into the role of Most High, casting himself as God's mouthpiece, but wound up as lord of the dead.

In some respects, the *nachash* took humanity with him when Adam and Eve were barred from the presence of God and the tree of life, imagery that telegraphed the theological message that humans are mortal and that everlasting life in God's presence could come only through God's grace and mercy. Without saving grace, humanity was now the rightful property of death and its lord.

God, the Life-giver, forgave Adam and Eve. They were not destroyed. Humanity *would* survive. They would bear children to perpetuate their line and, with it, keep God's original intention alive. The rule of God would someday return to earth—in his time and by his methods. Evil would impede, but not defeat, God's purpose. This new circumstance—this gracious *good news*—would demand that humanity make the choice rejected in Eden. From this point forward, dwelling forever as a member of God's family-council requires choosing loyalty to him above any other divine voice.

Free-will rebellion didn't end with Eden. It was only the beginning—for both divine and human imagers. Transgressions before ([Gen 6:1–4](#)) and after ([Gen 11:1–9](#); [Deut 32:8–9](#)) the flood are cases in point, as well as points of reference. They set the stage for the rest of the Old Testament.

Yahweh's portion would be Israel. He cast off the other nations and assigned them to lesser gods. Those gods become divine rivals, not servants, of Yahweh. Their rule is corrupt (Psa 82). The rest of the Old Testament pits Yahweh against those gods and Israel against their nations. To make matters worse, the residue of Genesis 6 lived among the inhabitants of those nations, on the ground that Yahweh had promised to Abraham. Yahweh's chosen portion of land would be contested. War loomed.

But first Yahweh's portion, his people, would have to take root. Yahweh would initiate a relationship with Abraham, and that required a meeting. That presented a fundamental problem for God. He is so unlike anything in human experience that his pure presence cannot be processed by the human senses. It would, in fact, be lethal. God's solution was to veil himself for human protection and detection. This was necessary even in Eden, where the writer casts God as a man, walking through the garden, searching for his fallen imagers ([Gen 3:8](#)). That, too, will emerge as a pattern hidden in plain sight.

PART 4

YAHWEH AND HIS PORTION

Abraham's Word

WE LEARNED FROM [DEUTERONOMY 32:8–9](#) THAT YAHWEH PLACED THE nations under the governance of junior *elohim*—the sons of God of his divine council. Having disinherited humanity, unwilling as it was to fulfill the mandate of Eden to overspread the earth, he decided it was time to start over. The reader of Genesis gets the feeling that the new beginning was almost immediate, as the Tower of Babel story is immediately followed by the call of Abram.

Abram was, of course, the original name of Abraham. God called this Mesopotamian man, seemingly out of the blue, to leave his extended family and journey to a foreign locale. God entered into a covenant with him, changed his name to Abraham,¹ and then enabled him and his wife to produce a son, Isaac, in their advanced age. Isaac in turn became the father of Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel.

Simple, right? It won't surprise you when I say there's much more going on than meets the eye. Abraham is about to meet his God—but for Abraham's protection, God must come to the man in a way that blunts the light of his own glory and helps Abraham process him as a person.

THE JOY OF ABRAHAM

We first encounter God's covenant promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. But that chapter isn't the beginning of God's dealing with Abraham. In Genesis 12, Abraham is not in Mesopotamia; he's in a place north of Canaan called Haran ([Gen 12:4](#)). To understand the real beginning of God's contact with Abraham, let's back up.

After the Babel episode, the remainder of Genesis 11 is devoted to a genealogy—the genealogy of Abram (Abraham) back to Noah's son Shem. Genealogies often contain something important or interesting, and this one is no exception. Compare the last two verses of Abraham's genealogical roots ([Gen 11:31–32](#)) with [Acts 7:2–4](#), and you'll discover that Yahweh first contacted Abraham before he got to Haran—and it was more than a conversation in his head. In [Acts 7:2–4](#), Stephen says:

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran,³ and said to him, “Go out from your land and from your relatives and come to the land that I will show you.”⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, he caused him to move to this land in which you now live.

The important element to catch here is in the first line: Yahweh *appeared* to Abraham. Abraham's first divine encounter in Mesopotamia involved *a visible appearance* of Yahweh. Genesis 12 is a follow-up. Abraham and Yahweh had talked before—face to face.

That's also what happened in Genesis 12. We're most familiar with the first three verses:

¹ And Yahweh said to Abram, “Go out from your land and from your relatives, and from the house of your father, to the land that I will show you.”² And I will make you a great nation, and I will

bless you, and I will make your name great. And you will be a blessing. ³ And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse. And all families of the earth will be blessed in you” (Gen 12:1–3).

But verses 6–7 deserve closer attention:

⁶ And Abram traveled through the land up to the place of Shechem, to the Oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanites *were* in the land at that time. ⁷ And Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” And he built an altar there to Yahweh, who had appeared to him (vv. 6–7).

Twice in these two verses we read that Yahweh *appeared* to Abraham.² A close reading of Genesis chapters 12 through 50 tells us that visible manifestation is the normal choice of Yahweh with respect to Abraham and his descendants, the patriarchs.

This brings us to Genesis 15:1–6, where the covenant of Genesis 12:1–3 is repeated and ratified by a covenantal ceremony. The description of the person speaking to Abraham here is even more startling. Note the emphasis in bold:

¹ After these things **the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision**, saying: “Do not be afraid, Abram; I am your shield, and your reward shall be very great.” ² Then Abram said, “O Yahweh, my Lord, what will you give me? I continue to be childless, and my heir is Eliezer of Damascus.” ³ And Abram said, “Look, you have not given me a descendant, and here, a member of my household is my heir.” ⁴ And behold, **the word of Yahweh** came to him saying, “This person will not be your heir, but your own son will be your heir.” ⁵ And **he brought him outside** and said, “Look toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them.” And he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed in Yahweh, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen 15:1–6).

This is a fascinating text. Notice right from the start that it is the “Word of Yahweh” who comes to Abraham *in a vision*.³ As before, the encounter was a visible manifestation of Yahweh. The Word here is something that can be *seen*—why else call it a *vision*?⁴ In verse 4 we read that the Word “*brought him [Abraham] outside*” to continue the conversation. This isn’t the kind of language one would expect if Abraham was hearing only a sound.

These appearances of the Word of Yahweh are the conceptual backdrop to the apostle John’s language in his gospel that Jesus was the Word. The most familiar instance is John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”) and John 1:14 (“And the Word became flesh and took up residence among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the one and only from the Father, full of grace and truth”).⁵ But John says some equally dramatic things in connection with this idea that are less familiar.

In John 8:56, Jesus, the incarnate Word, informs his Jewish antagonists *that he appeared to Abraham prior to his incarnation*: “Abraham your father rejoiced that he would see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” The Jews object vehemently to this claim, whereupon Jesus utters his famous statement, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Only Genesis 12 and 15 provide the coherent backdrop to this claim.⁶

I hope you grasp the significance of the interchange. Since the Word is clearly *equated with* and *identified as* Yahweh in Genesis 12 and 15, when the New Testament has Jesus saying “that was me,” he is claiming to be the Word of the Old Testament, who was the visible Yahweh.

This understanding is also behind some of the things Paul says about Abraham and Jesus. In [Galatians 3:8](#) Paul says that the gospel—that God would justify the Gentile nations—*was preached to Abraham*. This is a clear reference to the content of the Abrahamic covenant, delivered personally and visibly by the Word.

YAHWEH VISIBLE AND EMBODIED

The fact that the Old Testament at times has Yahweh appearing in visible form should now be on your radar. We’re going to see a lot more of him (pun intended).

One of my favorite passages that features Yahweh made visible is 1 Samuel 3, the story of the young soon-to-be prophet, Samuel. Many readers will no doubt be familiar with it. The chapter opens with the cryptic statement, “The word of Yahweh was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” The reader is predisposed by the comment to expect a *vision* of the “Word of Yahweh.” Samuel keeps hearing *a voice* calling his name while he’s trying to sleep. He assumes it’s the voice of the priest Eli and goes to the elderly man, but it was not Eli who spoke. After hearing the voice a third time, Eli realizes that it is Yahweh who is calling and instructs Samuel how to respond if it happens again.

Samuel goes back to bed. The narrative resumes in verse [10](#): “Then Yahweh came and stood *there* and called out as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, because your servant *is* listening.’ ” The description has Yahweh standing before Samuel. That he is clearly visible is made known by the ending of the chapter:

[19](#) And Samuel grew up, and Yahweh was with him. He did not allow any of his prophecies to go unfulfilled. [20](#) All Israel from Dan to Beersheba realized that Samuel was faithful as a prophet to Yahweh. [21](#) And Yahweh appeared again in Shiloh, for Yahweh revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh through the word of Yahweh ([1 Sam 3:19–21](#)).

I was amazed the first time I saw this passage for what it was really saying. Yahweh “appeared” to Samuel with regularity in verse [21](#). The first verse of the chapter makes a clear association between the Word of the Lord and a *visionary* experience—not a mere auditory event. The idea of the visible Word—the visible Yahweh—in human form is nailed down by the “standing” language.

Some passages go beyond presenting Yahweh in visible, human form. Genesis 18 is perhaps the most startling example where Yahweh is not only visible, but embodied.

[1](#) And Yahweh appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre. And he was sitting in the doorway of the tent at the heat of the day. [2](#) And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing near him. And he saw them and ran from the doorway of the tent to meet them. And he bowed down to the ground. [3](#) And he said, “My lord, if I have found favor in your eyes do not pass by your servant. [4](#) Let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest under the tree. [5](#) And let me bring a piece of bread, then refresh yourselves. Afterward you can pass on, once you have passed by with your servant.” Then they said, “Do so as you have said” ([Gen 18:1–5](#)).

That one of these three men is Yahweh is evident from the first verse. That the appearance of Yahweh and his two companions is physical is telegraphed by the request to wash their feet and partake in a meal (vv. 4–5), which they subsequently do (v. 8).

The narrator and the reader of course know that one of the men is Yahweh, but does Abraham? That he does is made clear from the conversation he has with the embodied Yahweh. After their meal the other two men (who we discover are angels in Gen 19) leave to go to Sodom. Once Abraham discerns that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is imminent, he objects out of concern for his nephew Lot, a resident of Sodom. Addressing the Yahweh figure Abraham says in verse 25, “Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to kill the righteous with the wicked, that the righteous would be as the wicked! Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” Abraham knows the person before him is the “Judge of all the earth” since he addresses his plea directly. He addresses the figure as “you” twice before the rhetorical question that invokes the divine title.

How did Abraham know that the figure before whom he stood was Yahweh? The chronology of his encounters in Genesis would tell us that he had heard Yahweh’s voice before. This aural recognition is present in other passages involving Abraham that we’ll see in a moment. But I also think Abraham *visually* recognized his visitor from those previous encounters.⁷

One final example from the Old Testament of an embodied Yahweh who is the “Word” is far less known, but no less dramatic. In Jeremiah 1 the prophet is called to service. He writes that “The word of Yahweh” came to him and said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you came out from the womb I consecrated you; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah identifies this Word as Yahweh himself when he replies, “Ah, Lord Yahweh! I do not know how to speak, for I am a youth” (v. 6). Yahweh—the Word—tells him to not be afraid, and then something shocking happens. Jeremiah writes in verse 9 that Yahweh, the Word, “stretched out his hand and he touched my mouth.”

Sounds don’t reach out and touch people. This is the language of a physical, embodied presence.

WHISPERS OF A GODHEAD

These passages raise three questions.

First, it’s one thing to see that Yahweh appears in human form even to the point of embodiment, but what is the logic of this language? In other words, why do this?

Second, how is it that, if this Word was Yahweh, and the Word was visible and embodied, Jews of Jesus’ day could tolerate the notion that Jesus was Yahweh incarnate on earth—while Yahweh was still in heaven? After all, Jesus prayed to the Father and spoke of the Father, Yahweh of Israel, in the third person. How could a Jew accommodate this “binitarian” idea—that, essentially, there were two Yahwehs, one invisible and in heaven, the other on earth in visible form?⁸

Third, does this help or harm the New Testament articulation of a Trinity? Was the Trinity a new idea?

The answers to these questions are all found in the Old Testament. What we’ve begun to uncover in this chapter are whispers of the idea of a Godhead—in the Old Testament, the Bible of Judaism. Those whispers will get much louder as we continue.

Yahweh Visible and Invisible

AT THE CLOSE OF THE LAST CHAPTER I NOTED THAT THE “WORD OF YAHWEH” being a visible appearance of God as a man raised certain questions. One of those was how a first-century Jew would have parsed the idea of Jesus being the “Word made flesh.” True, there was Old Testament precedent for Yahweh being visible and embodied. That phenomenon would have helped a Jew accept at least the idea that God could show up in human form.

But it was more complicated than that. When Jesus referred to God in the third person, or prayed to God, what then? Would a Jew have been able to wrap her mind around that one? How could God be here (visibly and physically) and still be in heaven? Today, this apparent conundrum is what keeps many Jews from embracing Christianity—it feels like polytheism to them. Given this context, it’s amazing how first-century Jews could embrace Jesus as Yahweh and not feel as if they were betraying the God of Israel. In fact, these same Jews were willing to die instead of worshiping the gods of the Greeks and the Romans.

We could also ask certain questions about readers of the Old Testament prior to the time of Jesus. When ancient Israelites read the passages we looked at in the last chapter, did they imagine that Yahweh was localized in only one place? Had he left heaven? Was he no longer omnipresent?

The startling reality is that long before Jesus and the New Testament, careful readers of the Old Testament would not have been troubled by the notion of, essentially, two Yahwehs—one invisible and in heaven, the other manifest on earth in a variety of visible forms, including that of a man. In some instances the two Yahweh figures are found *together in the same scene*. In this and the chapter that follows, we’ll see that the “Word” was just one expression of a visible Yahweh in human form.¹

The concept of a Godhead in the Old Testament has many facets and layers.² After the birth of his promised son, Isaac, Abraham’s spiritual journey includes a divine figure that is integral to Israelite Godhead thinking: the Angel of Yahweh. Although the most telling passages that show this angel as a visible embodiment of the very presence of Yahweh occur later than the time of Abraham, there are early hints of his nature during the lifetimes of Abraham and his sons.

THE ANGEL OF YAHWEH

The heart-wrenching story of Genesis 22, where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his covenant son Isaac, is our next stop. It’s something of a transitional passage. We’ve seen that Abraham has had several encounters with Yahweh. The expression used to convey the visible, physical nature of those encounters has, to this point, been “the word of Yahweh.” Genesis 22 marks a shift in the language for a visible Yahweh figure to the “Angel of Yahweh.”

Although the Angel of Yahweh appears earlier than Genesis 22 ([Gen 16:7–11](#); [21:17](#)), this particularly appearance begins to blur the identities of Yahweh and his angel. [Genesis 22:1–9](#) relates how Abraham has taken Isaac, at the bizarre command of Yahweh, to Mount Moriah to offer his son as a burnt offering. We pick up the story in verse [10](#).

¹⁰ And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ And the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham! Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² And he said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the boy; do not do anything to him. For now I know that you are one who fears God, since you have not withheld your son, your only child, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, a ram was caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. ¹⁴ And Abraham called the name of that place “Yahweh will provide,” for which reason it is said today, “on the mountain of Yahweh it shall be provided.” ¹⁵ And the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from heaven. ¹⁶ And he said, “I swear by myself, declares Yahweh, that because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only child, ¹⁷ that I will certainly bless you and greatly multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and as the sand that is by the shore of the sea. And your offspring will take possession of the gate of his enemies. ¹⁸ All the nations of the earth will be blessed through your offspring, because you have listened to my voice” (Gen 22:10–18).

The first thing to notice is that when the angel of Yahweh speaks to Abraham, Abraham recognizes the voice. He does not ask the identity of the speaker, as though the voice is unfamiliar. He does not fear that he is harkening to the voice of another god. The reader, however, knows that the source is not Yahweh per se, but the angel of Yahweh. The word translated “angel” here is the Hebrew word *mal’ak*, which simply means “messenger.”

The next observation is very important. The Angel speaks to Abraham in verse 11, and so is distinguished from God. But immediately after doing so, he commends Abraham for not withholding Isaac “from *me*.” There is a switch to the first person which, given that God himself had told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1–2), seems to require seeing Yahweh as the speaker.

Many scholars would say that this is due to the Angel being Yahweh’s mouthpiece, standing in Yahweh’s place as it were. But that idea is conveyed only *later* in the passage when (v. 16) the angel prefaces his words with “declares Yahweh.” In verse 11 there is no such clarification. The wording of the text *blurs the distinction* between Yahweh and the angel by swapping the angel into the role of the person who initially demanded the sacrifice as a test—Yahweh himself (Gen 22:1–2). Consequently the biblical writer had the opportunity to make sure Yahweh and the angel were distinguished, but did not do so. This “failure” occurs in several other places in the Old Testament even more overtly. It’s not really a failure. It’s not a careless oversight. The wording is *designed* to blur the two persons.

THE GODS OF ISAAC AND JACOB

Genesis 26:1–5 marks Yahweh’s first visible *appearance* to Isaac (“And Isaac went ... to Gerar ... and Yahweh appeared to him”). It is a sign to Isaac that the covenant made with his father will be carried on through him. Yahweh repeats the words of the covenant to Isaac (vv. 3–4): “I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. And I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and I will give to your descendants all these lands. And all nations of the earth will be blessed through your offspring.” Later in Genesis 26 (vv. 23–25) Yahweh appears to Isaac again. The baton has been passed.

Isaac's son Jacob receives the same divine approval in a series of visual encounters with Yahweh. The first instance is the well-known story of "Jacob's Ladder" in [Genesis 28:10–22](#). Several details of the vision are noteworthy for continuing our discussion.

Jacob is on the way to Haran (vv. [1–2](#)), the place from which his ancestor Abraham had departed years earlier at Yahweh's command. Jacob is fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau after stealing the birthright through deception (Gen 27). Scholars generally agree that the "ladder" is probably some sort of stairstep structure that (in Jacob's dream) connected heaven and earth, perhaps a ziggurat.³ Jacob sees "angels of God" going up and down the structure, an indication of the presence of the divine council. Jacob also sees the visible Yahweh standing beside him ([28:13](#))—the familiar language for Yahweh in human form we noted with Abraham.⁴ In verse [15](#) Yahweh promises protection for Jacob and pledges to bring the man back to this location, the land promised to Abraham. Jacob names the place Bethel, "house of God" (v. [19](#)), and erects a pillar to commemorate his conversation with Yahweh (vv. [18–19](#)).

Jacob saw the visible Yahweh at Bethel. Given what we've already seen in Genesis, this isn't unusual. Things get more interesting in Genesis 31, the story of how Jacob became wealthy at the expense of his uncle, Laban. Jacob's flocks had multiplied supernaturally despite Laban's attempt to cheat him. As their relationship soured, Jacob had a dream. The wording is significant:

¹¹ Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, "Jacob," and I said, "Here I am." ¹² And he said, "Lift up your eyes and see—all the rams mounting the flock are streaked, speckled, and dappled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a stone pillar, where you made a vow to me. Now get up, go out from this land and return to the land of your birth" ([Gen 31:11–13](#)).

The angel of God explicitly tells Jacob in verse [13](#) that he was the God of Bethel. Jacob had seen angels at Bethel and one lone deity—Yahweh, the God of Abraham. It was Yahweh who had promised protection, and to whom Jacob had erected the stone pillar. This passage fuses the two figures. This fusion is helpful for parsing Jacob's subsequent divine encounters.

As Jacob's life proceeds, he's in and out of trouble. Yet Yahweh is with him. After he succeeds in fleeing from his uncle Laban, Jacob learns in the course of his travels that he will soon be coming face-to-face with Esau, the brother from whom he had stolen his father's blessing years ago. At the time of Jacob's trickery, Esau had sought to kill him, and so now Jacob is wondering whether his brother is still holding a grudge. That meeting occurs in Genesis 33. But it's what happens to Jacob in the preceding chapter that draws our attention.

In Genesis 32 we learn a lot about Jacob's state of mind—and God's loyalty to him. In [Genesis 32:1](#) God sends angels to meet him. This time it is no dream. Nevertheless, Jacob can't set aside his anxiety. He takes steps to bribe Esau, sending extravagant gifts ahead of the caravan. He removes his children and their four mothers to the other side of the Jabbok, a small stream ([Gen 32:22–23](#)). Alone, that night he has his most famous encounter with God—or maybe someone else who was also God. The story reads:

²⁴ And Jacob remained alone, and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the dawn. ²⁵ And when he saw that he could not prevail against him, he struck his hip socket, so that Jacob's hip socket was sprained as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking."

But he answered, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ Then he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ And he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked and said, “Please tell me your name.” And he said, “Why do you ask this—for my name?” And he blessed him there. ³⁰ Then Jacob called the name of the place Peniel which means “I have seen God face to face and my life was spared” ([Gen 32:24–30](#)).

[Genesis 32:28–29](#) makes it apparent that the “man” with whom Jacob wrestled was a divine being. The mysterious combatant himself says “you have striven with *elohim*,” a term we know can be translated either “God” or “a god.” The narrative nowhere says Jacob’s encounter was only a vision. This *elohim* is tangible and corporeal. [Hosea 12:3–4](#) confirms the divine identity of Jacob’s opponent—but then adds two surprising details.⁵ Note the way Hosea uses parallelism to express the thought:

³ In the womb he [Jacob] deceived his brother,
and in his manhood **he struggled** [Hebrew, *sarah*] *with God* [*elohim*].

⁴ **He struggled** [Hebrew, *yasar*] *with the angel*
and prevailed:

he pleaded for his mercy.

He met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him.⁶

Not only does Hosea describe Jacob’s *elohim* opponent as an angel, but the last line of this quotation identifies this angel *with Bethel*. Curiously, we know from Genesis 32 that this incident did not occur at Bethel—it was at the waters of the Jabbok. Hosea’s inspired commentary on the incident isn’t about geography, though. He’s telling us that Jacob wrestled with God himself, physically embodied—and identifies God with the angel who said he was the God of Bethel.⁷

We’ve seen this “confusion” of God with an angel before. It is deliberate. The point is not that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is a mere angel. The reverse is the case. *This angel is Yahweh*.

We have one more passage to consider. The way it fuses Yahweh and the angel is nothing short of amazing.

Genesis 48 records Jacob’s deathbed words of blessing to Joseph’s children. The passage references the God who had appeared to him at Bethel, who, readers know from [Genesis 31:13](#), is called an angel. It’s all set up for the thunderbolt in the section in bold below (vv. [15–16](#)):

¹ And it happened that after these things, it was said to Joseph, “Behold, your father is ill.” And he took his two sons with him, Ephraim and Manasseh. ² And it was told to Jacob, “Behold, your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel strengthened himself and he sat up in the bed. ³ Then Jacob said to Joseph, “El-Shaddai appeared to me in Luz [Bethel],⁸ in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and make you numerous, and will make you a company of nations. And I will give this land to your offspring after you as an everlasting possession.’ ...

¹⁴ And Israel stretched out his right hand and put it on the head of Ephraim (now he was the

younger), and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn. ¹⁵ **And he blessed Joseph and said,**

**“The God [*elohim*] before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked,
The God [*elohim*] who shepherded me all my life unto this day,**

¹⁶ **The angel [*mal’ak*] who redeemed me from all evil,
may he bless the boys** ([Gen 48:1–4, 14–16](#)).

The parallel position of *elohim* and *mal’ak* (“angel”) is unmistakable. Since the Bible very clearly teaches that God is eternal and existed before all things, and that angels are created beings, the point of this explicit parallel is not to say that God is an angel. On the other hand, it affirms that *this* angel *is* God.⁹ But the most striking feature is the verb (“may *he* bless”). In Hebrew, the verb “bless” in this passage *is not grammatically plural*, which would indicate two different persons are being asked to bless the boys. Rather, *it is singular*, thereby telegraphing a tight *fusion* of the two divine beings on the part of the author. In other words, the writer had a clear opportunity to distinguish the God of Israel from the angel, but instead *merges their identities*.

As we leave this chapter, the implications of what we’ve seen are staggering. The patriarchal stories create an astonishing picture for us. If there is only one God—one Yahweh—then why does the writer fuse Yahweh and the angel in some passages, but have the angel refer to God in the third person in others? Why blur the distinction between Yahweh and this angel and yet keep them distinct? What’s being communicated?

When the biblical text does this, it pushes us to wonder whether there are two Yahwehs, one invisible in heaven and one visible on earth. We’ll see next that this is precisely the point. The God of Israel is God, but in more than one person.

What's in a Name?

WE'VE SEEN SOME UNUSUAL THINGS IN THE LAST TWO CHAPTERS. FIRST, Yahweh called Abraham into covenant relationship with him, then he continued that relationship with Isaac and Jacob, whose name became Israel. The descendants of Israel were Yahweh's portion of humanity.

But the interactions between Yahweh and the patriarchs seemed convoluted. Sometimes Yahweh came visible as “the Word.” At other times he came as an angel, apparently sent by Yahweh! Still other times there was only Yahweh in human form without any descriptive label. The language created questions about whether Israelites affirmed or denied omnipresence, and about their conception of Yahweh's identity.

In this chapter we'll be introduced to another expression for Yahweh. Its use in several passages makes it clear that the biblical writers conceived of two Yahwehs—one invisible and always present in the spiritual realm (“the heavens”), the other brought forth to interact with humanity on earth, most typically as a man. That there must be two is indicated by their simultaneous presence in some familiar stories.¹

THE BURNING BUSH

The story of the exodus from Egypt really begins in chapter 3 of the book by that name. Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush has been etched into our minds by Sunday school teachers, ministers, and of course Cecil B. DeMille's epic film *The Ten Commandments*. But there's something you may have never noticed about the bush. Hollywood certainly missed it.

¹ And Moses was a shepherd with the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the west of the desert, and he came to the mountain of God, to Horeb. ² And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush, and he looked, and there was the bush burning with fire, but the bush was not being consumed. ³ And Moses said, “Let me turn aside and see this great sight. Why does the bush not burn up?” ⁴ And Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, and God called to him from the midst of the bush, and he said, “Moses, Moses.” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵ And he said, “You must not come near to here. Take off your sandals from on your feet, because the place on which you *are* standing, it *is* holy ground.” ⁶ And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face because he was afraid of looking at God ([Exod 3:1–6](#)).

The text quite clearly states that “the angel of Yahweh” was in the bush (v. 2). But when Moses turns to look at the bush (v. 3), the text has Yahweh observing him and calling to him—“from the midst of the bush” (v. 4). Both the Angel—the visible Yahweh in human form—and the invisible Yahweh are characters in the burning bush scene. Interestingly, verse 6 tells us that Moses was afraid to look at God. This suggests that he had discerned something other than fire in the bush—most likely, the human form of the angel. The New Testament affirms this description in [Acts 7:30–35](#). The martyr Stephen

twice tells us that there was an angel in the bush (vv. 30, 35).

In the conversation that ensues, Yahweh (v. 7) reveals his covenant name to Moses: I AM (Exod 3:14). If Yahweh is speaking to Moses, one has to wonder why the Angel was needed. If Yahweh is doing the talking, why does he need a messenger? Or perhaps when the writer says Yahweh is speaking, he means the Angel. Like the passages in Genesis we've already seen, Exodus 3 includes Yahweh and his angel in the same scene as distinct figures, but then creates ambiguity between them. Are there two or one? Are the two the same but different? The reader is being prepped for something dramatic to come. He won't have long to wait.

THE ANGEL, THE NAME, THE PRESENCE

We know what happens after the burning bush. Yahweh, through Moses, delivers Israel from Egypt. Moses leads the people to Sinai to meet their God, receive the law, and prepare for the journey to the promised land. There's a short conversation between God and Moses about that task that is habitually overlooked by Bible readers. In Exodus 23 God says:

²⁰ “Look, I *am about to* send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, because he will not forgive your transgression, for my name is in him. ²² But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes” (Exod 23:20–22).

There's something strange about God's description to Moses that tells us that this is no ordinary angel. This angel has the authority to pardon sins or not, a status that belongs to God. More specifically, God tells Moses that the reason this angel has this authority is “my name is in him” (v. 21).

What does this curious phrase mean? Moses knew instantly. Anyone thinking of the burning bush account does as well. When God told Moses that his name was in this angel, he was saying that *he was in this angel*—his very presence or essence. The I AM of the burning bush would accompany Moses and the Israelites to the promised land and fight for them. Only he could defeat the gods of the nations and the descendants of the Nephilim whom Moses and Joshua would find there.

Other passages confirm that this reading is correct. This angel is Yahweh. Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate this is to compare Old Testament passages about who it was that brought Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land.

I *am* Yahweh, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be for you as God (Lev 11:45).

³⁵ You yourselves were shown this wonder in order for you to acknowledge that Yahweh is the God; there is no other God besides him. ³⁶ From heaven he made you hear his voice to teach you, and on the earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from the midst of the fire.

³⁷ And because he loved your ancestors he chose their descendants after them. And he brought you forth from Egypt with his own presence, by his great strength, ³⁸ to drive out nations greater and more numerous than you from before you, to bring you and to give to you their land as an inheritance, as it is this day² (Deut 4:35–38). Yahweh our God brought us and our ancestors from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery, and did these great signs before our eyes. He

protected us along the entire way that we went, and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. And Yahweh drove out all the people before us ([Josh 24:17–18a](#)).

And the angel of Yahweh went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you to the land that I had promised to your ancestors” ([Judg 2:1](#)).

These passages interchange Yahweh, the Angel of Yahweh, and the “presence” (*panim*) of God as the identity of the divine deliverer of Israel from Egypt. There weren’t three different deliverers. They are all the same. One of them, the angel, takes human form. If [Deuteronomy 4:37](#) is read in light of [Exodus 23:20–23](#), then the presence and the Angel are co-identified. This makes good sense in view of the meaning of the “Name” which was in the Angel.

THE NAME

Some readers with Jewish friends or a Jewish background know that even today the phrase “the Name” (*ha-shem*) is used by many Jews in the place of the divine name Yahweh.³ The biblical passages we’ve seen above show that there is biblical precedent for the practice. In other passages, “the Name” functions as a substitute word for Yahweh. In several the Name is personified—the Name is *a person*. [Isaiah 30:27–28](#) is quite striking in this regard:

²⁷ Look! The name of Yahweh comes from afar,
burning with his anger and heaviness of cloud.
His lips are full of indignation,
and his tongue is like a devouring fire.

²⁸ And his breath is like an overflowing river;
it reaches up to the neck.

The Name is clearly cast as an entity, as Yahweh himself, in this text. In [Psalm 20:1, 7](#), this is explicit:

¹ May Yahweh answer you in the day of trouble.
May the name of Jacob’s God protect you.

⁷ Some boast in chariots and others in horses,
but we boast in the name of Yahweh, our God.

How is it that the psalmist would pray that “the Name” protect anyone? Israelites wouldn’t get much protection from a string of consonants (Y-H-W-H). The point of the psalm is that trusting in the Name means trusting in Yahweh himself—*he is the Name*.

Deuteronomy has a lot to say about the Name, especially with respect to the Name being the very presence of God that will reside in the Tabernacle, the holy city, and eventually the Temple.⁴ Deuteronomy 12 is representative (note the emphasis in bold):

² You must completely demolish all of the places there where they served their gods, that is, the **nations** whom you are about to dispossess. . . . ⁴ You shall not worship Yahweh your God like this. ⁵ But only to the place that Yahweh your God will choose from all of your tribes **to place his**

name there as his dwelling shall you seek, and there you shall go . . . ¹¹ and then at the place that Yahweh your God will choose, **to let his name dwell there**, there you shall bring all the things I am commanding you ([Deut 12:2, 4–5, 11](#)).

THE COMMANDER OF YAHWEH’S ARMY

Readers may have already anticipated that the angel in whom Yahweh’s name, his presence, dwells can be identified as the mysterious figure encountered by Joshua just before the wars of conquest. I would agree. Here is the passage in Joshua 5:

¹³ And it happened, when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up, and he saw a man standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said, “Are you with us, or with our adversaries?” ¹⁴ And he said, “Neither. I have come now as the commander of Yahweh’s army.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and he bowed down and said to him, “What is my lord commanding his servant?” ¹⁵ The commander of Yahweh’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so ([Josh 5:13–15](#)).

An important clue to identifying this “man” as the angel of Yahweh is the drawn sword in his hand. The Hebrew phrase here occurs only two other times: [Numbers 22:23](#) and [1 Chronicles 21:16](#). Both explicitly name the Angel of Yahweh as the one with “drawn sword” in hand.

The connection is unmistakable on two other counts. Joshua bows to the man, an instinctive reaction to the divine presence. The commander orders Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” The wording comes from [Exodus 3:5](#), the burning bush passage. The angel of Yahweh was in that bush.⁵

AN INTRIGUING CONVERSATION

The angel of [Exodus 23:20–23](#) did indeed go with Moses and Joshua to claim the promised land. In the wake of Joshua’s death, however, Israel failed to complete the task. The Angel of Yahweh appeared in Judges 2 bringing news no one wanted to hear:

¹ And the angel of Yahweh went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and I brought you to the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you. ² And as for you, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; break down their altars.’ But you did not listen to my voice. Why would you do such a thing? ³ Now I say, I will not drive them out from before you; they will become as thorns for you, and their gods will be a trap for you.” ⁴ And as the angel of Yahweh spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people wept bitterly ([Judg 2:1–4](#)).

The angel of Yahweh’s departure signaled an end to the regular presence of Yahweh with Israel. But even in the dark period of the judges he wouldn’t stay away completely. The call of Gideon in Judges 6 includes one appearance during this period. The passage is lengthy, so the important items are in bold..

11 The angel of Yahweh came and sat under the oak that was at Ophrah that belonged to Jehoash the Abiezrite; and Gideon his son was threshing wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. **12 The angel of Yahweh appeared to him** and said to him, “**Yahweh is with you**, you mighty warrior.” **13** Gideon said to him, “Excuse me, my lord. If Yahweh is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has forsaken us; he has given us into the palm of Midian.” **14 And Yahweh turned to him and said**, “Go in this your strength, and you will deliver Israel from the palm of Midian. Did I not send you?” **15 He [Gideon] said to him**, “Excuse me, my lord. How will I deliver Israel? Look, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.” **16 And Yahweh said to him**, “But I will be with you, and you will defeat Midian as if they are one man.” **17** And he said to him, “Please, if I have found favor in your eyes, show me a sign that you are speaking with me. **18 Please, do not depart from here** until I come back to you and bring out my gift and set it out before you.” And he said, “**I will stay** until you return.”

19 And Gideon went and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; he put meat in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and **he brought them to him under the oak** and presented them. **20 The angel of God said to him**, “Take the meat and the unleavened cakes and put them on this rock; pour the broth over it.” And he did so. **21** Then the **angel of Yahweh** reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and he touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire went up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And **the angel of Yahweh went from his sight**. **22** And Gideon realized that he was the angel of Yahweh; and Gideon said, “Oh, my lord Yahweh! For now I have seen the angel of Yahweh face to face.” **23** And **Yahweh said to him**, “Peace be with you. Do not fear; you will not die.” **24** And Gideon built there an altar to Yahweh, and he called it “Yahweh is peace.” To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites ([Judg 6:11–24](#)).

This is a fascinating passage. In verse [11](#) the angel sits down under the oak tree for the conversation. He makes his visible presence known to Gideon in verse [12](#). There is no indication that Gideon considers his presence at all strange. Gideon’s disgruntled reference to Yahweh in verse [13](#) makes it clear he doesn’t know the man is Yahweh. The reader, however, knows that, since the narrator has *Yahweh* taking part in the conversation (vv. [14–16](#)).

The scene is reminiscent of the burning bush (Exod 3) except that both Yahwehs have speaking roles. This serves to put the two characters on the same level to the reader. That tactic is by now familiar—putting both figures on par to blur the distinction. But in the case of Judges 6, the writer also makes them clearly separate.

That there are two clearly separate Yahweh figures becomes more dramatic after verse [19](#). Gideon asks the man (who is logically the angel of Yahweh) to stay put while Gideon makes a meal for him. The stranger agrees. When Gideon returns, he brings the meal to the tree (v. [19](#)). The narrator has the Angel of God receiving it. Again that’s logical, since the angel had sat there at the beginning of the story.

Now comes the shocker. The angel of Yahweh burns up the sacrifice and then leaves (v. [21](#)). But we learn in verse [23](#) that *Yahweh is still there* and speaks to Gideon after the Angel’s departure. Not

only did the writer blur the distinction between the two figures, but he had them both in the same scene.

RAMIFICATIONS

The most familiar way to process what we've seen is to think about the way we talk about Jesus. Christians affirm that God is more than one Person, but that each of those Persons is the same in essence. We affirm that Jesus is one of those Persons. He is God. But in another respect, Jesus isn't God—he is not the Father. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Nevertheless, they are the same in essence.

This theology did not originate in the New Testament. You've now been exposed to its Old Testament roots. There are two Yahweh figures in Old Testament thinking—one invisible, the other visible and human in form. Judaism before the first century, the time of Jesus, knew this teaching. That's why ancient Jewish theology once embraced two Yahweh figures (the “two powers”).⁶ But once this teaching came to involve the risen Jesus of Nazareth, Judaism could no longer tolerate it.

We'll see specifically how New Testament writers repurposed the two-Yahwehs theology in later chapters. For now, we need to pay a visit to Sinai. Yahweh needs to lay down the law ... with the help of his angel and the divine council.

Who Is like Yahweh?

YAHWEH, THE MOST HIGH, THE GOD OF GODS, SHUNNED THE NATIONS. HE made himself known to his chosen people, his earthly portion, in the form of a man. The revelation began with Abraham and was repeated to Isaac and Jacob, Abraham's son and grandson. The Angel who was Yahweh in human form changed Jacob's name to Israel ([Gen 32:27–28](#)). Jacob's sons would eventually engage in a treachery against Joseph, one of their own, that would providentially place Israel in Egypt.

Many Bible readers wonder why God would have allowed (much less instructed, as in [Gen 46:3–4](#)) Israel to go to Egypt. The question becomes even more pressing given what I've called the "Deuteronomy 32 worldview," where the nations and their gods are pitted against Israel and Yahweh. The human propensity toward evil seems to explain why the Egyptians feared and then enslaved the Israelites after the death of Joseph, resorting even to murder to control the population (Exod 1–2). There's more to it than that.

THE VOICE OF PROVIDENCE

The story of Yahweh's disinheritance of the nations would have been passed on orally through generations of Israelites during the bondage in Egypt. Every Israelite child would have learned about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. They would learn that their very existence was the result of a supernatural act, given that Isaac was born by supernatural intervention. They had life because of Isaac's life.

But the story produced a conundrum: *Why doesn't this God of gods deliver us?* Oral tradition would have preserved such a promise. Yahweh had sent Joseph into Egypt to preserve Israel from famine and had promised both Abraham and Jacob that he would bring them back to the land he had promised them ([Gen 15:13–16](#); [46:4](#)).

The deliverance from Egypt would resolve that issue—and that wasn't the only question God's providential acts would address. The Israelites asked "*Where* is Yahweh?" in the wake of God's decision to send them into hostile territory. But Pharaoh and his people—and all the nations—asked a different question: "*Who* is Yahweh?" ([Exod 5:2](#)). They would find out the hard way.

The reason for Israel's circumstances was that it wasn't sufficient that only Israel knew Yahweh was Most High among all gods, and that Israel was his portion. The other nations had to know that as well. Scripture makes it clear that Israel's deliverance had that effect. Israel was in Egypt precisely so that Yahweh could deliver them—thereby conveying this theological message.

YAHWEH AND THE GODS OF EGYPT

Gentiles back in Canaan heard about what Yahweh had done ([Josh 2:8–10](#); cf. [Exod 15:16–18](#); [Josh 9:9](#)). In Midian, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, put the impact in no uncertain terms: "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods, even in the matter where they the Egyptians dealt arrogantly against the Israelites" ([Exod 18:11](#)). Yahweh's reputation among the nations was linked to Israel's

exodus and transplantation in the land ([Num 14:15–16](#); [Deut 9:28](#); [Josh 7:9](#); [2 Sam 7:23](#)).

This backdrop is why the exodus event is repeatedly cast as a conflict between Yahweh and the gods. Pharaoh, as we know, was unresponsive to the command of God through Moses to let his people go. In [Exodus 5:2](#), Pharaoh had sarcastically asked Moses, “Who is Yahweh that I should listen to his voice to release Israel?” His answer came in a series of horrible plagues.

The Bible tells us the plagues were aimed at Egypt’s gods ([Exod 12:12](#); [Num 33:4](#)), the *elohim* who had been given their authority by Yahweh and who were supposed to govern Egypt on his behalf. The idea is not that each plague neatly corresponds to an Egyptian deity, only that the powerful acts of Yahweh went beyond the power of the gods of Egypt and their divine representative-son, Pharaoh.¹

Egyptian theology linked Pharaoh and Egypt’s pantheon. From the fourth dynasty onward in Egypt, Pharaoh was considered the son of the high God Re. He was, to borrow the biblical expression, Re’s image on earth, the maintainer of the cosmic order established by Re and his pantheon at the creation.

Pharaoh was the son of Re. Israel was explicitly called the son of Yahweh in the confrontation with Pharaoh ([Exod 4:23](#); cf. [Hos 11:1](#)). Yahweh and his son would defeat the high god of Egypt and his son. God against god, son against son, imager against imager. In that context, the plagues are spiritual warfare. Yahweh will undo the cosmic order, throwing the land into chaos.²

The final plague in particular, the death of the firstborn, was aimed at Egypt’s gods. God told Moses, “And I will go through the land of Egypt during this night, and I will strike all of the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and I will do punishments among all of the gods of Egypt. I am Yahweh” ([Exod 12:12](#)).

The spiritual conflict is brought into vivid and tragic focus in this last plague. Yahweh would act directly, in the form of his angel, against the gods and people of Egypt. We read in [Exodus 12:23](#) (ESV), “For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer [*mashkhit*] to enter your houses to strike you.”

There is no explicit reference to the Angel here. However, the word translated “destroyer” (*mashkhit*) gives us a clue as to who the destroyer was. The term *mashkhit* is employed in only three passages to describe divine judgment: here in [Exodus 12:23](#); [2 Samuel 24:16](#); and [1 Chronicles 21:15](#). These last two instances describe the same event—the judgment for David’s sin carried out by the Angel of Yahweh. [2 Samuel 24:16–17a](#) reads:

¹⁶ When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, Yahweh regretted about the evil, and he said to the angel who brought destruction [*mashkhit*] among the people, “Enough, now relax your hand.” Now the angel of Yahweh was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

¹⁷ David spoke to Yahweh when he saw the angel destroying among the people.

An identification of the destroyer with the Angel of the LORD is also perhaps suggested by [Zechariah 12:8–10](#). In the context of the eschatological Day of the LORD we read:

⁸ On that day Yahweh will put a shield around the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the one who stumbles among them on that day will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the angel of Yahweh, before them. ⁹ And then on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations coming against Jerusalem. ¹⁰ “ ‘I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication, and they will look to me whom they pierced, and

they shall mourn over him, as one wails over an only child, and they will grieve bitterly over him as one grieves bitterly over a firstborn” ([Zech 12:8–10](#)).

The passage clearly identifies the angel with Yahweh, who seeks to destroy all the nations coming against Jerusalem and his people. The reference to those who suffer as grieving over a firstborn is a striking allusion back to the last plague against Egypt and the death angel.

That the destroyer is Yahweh’s special angel should be no surprise. We’ve already looked ahead at his appearance to Joshua as commander of Yahweh’s host. Yahweh comes in human form to be among his people and to fight for them, judging those who sought his people’s enslavement and death (Exod 1–2; 13–14). The visible Yahweh would later do the same to other enemies, like the Assyrians ([Isa 37:36](#)).

WHO IS LIKE YAHWEH AMONG THE GODS?

On the other side of the Red Sea crossing, this earthly judgment of Egypt is clearly viewed as a victorious outcome of a cosmic conflict in the unseen world. As we’ve seen so often before, behind a familiar story much is missed without a grasp of the ancient cosmic worldview.

Having crossed the watery chasm³ on dry land, Moses and the people of Israel sang the praises of the unmatched Yahweh. This song is recorded for us in Exodus 15. Moses asks, “Who is like Yahweh, among the gods [*elim*]?” The answer to the rhetorical question is obvious. Yahweh is incomparable. *No other god is like him*. As I noted earlier, if the other gods were considered fairy tales by Israelites, this statement is at best a joke and at worst a lie.

Why is it, then, that [Psalm 74:12–17](#) describes the crossing as involving the defeat of a sea monster?

- [12](#) But God has been my king from long ago,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.
- [13](#) You split open the sea [*yam*] by your strength;
You broke the heads of the sea monsters [*tanninim*] in the waters.
- [14](#) You crushed the heads of Leviathan [*liwyatan*];
you gave him as food to the desert dwelling creatures.
- [15](#) You split open spring and wadi.
You dried up ever-flowing rivers.
- [16](#) Yours is the day, yours is the night also.
You established light and the sun.
- [17](#) You defined all the boundaries of the earth;
Summer and winter—you formed them.

Did you catch the language? God “split open the sea” and crushed the heads of “sea monsters” (*tanninim*) and Leviathan (*liwyatan*), giving the beasts as food for “*desert dwelling creatures*.” God split open the “spring and wadi,” two terms frequently associated with desert water sources, and dried up “rivers.” What happened to the *sea*?

To make things even more confusing, the psalm has a number of allusions to Genesis 1. In the original creation chapter, God also “divided the waters” ([Gen 1:6–7](#)). Virtually all of the language in

verses [Psalm 74:16–17](#) can be found in Genesis 1 ([Gen 1:4–5](#), [9–10](#), [14–18](#)).

Confusing? An ancient Israelite would have no trouble deciphering the messaging in Psalm 74 and recognizing that it ties the exodus crossing to creation—and then links both events to slaying a sea monster known as Leviathan.⁴

The symbolic imagery of Leviathan and the “sea” (*yam*) is well known from the ancient literature of Ugarit, a city-state in ancient Syria.⁵ Of the stories that have survived from Ugarit, one of the most famous describes how Baal became king of the gods. This story is the backdrop for Psalm 74.

The epic tale describes how Baal battles against *Yamm*, a deity symbolized as a chaotic, violent force, often depicted as a dragon-like sea monster. In the guise of this sea beast, *Yamm* was also referred to by the names *Tannun* or *Litanu*. The overlap with the biblical terminology is transparent. Baal defeated the raging sea and the sea monster, earning “everlasting dominion” over the gods. The moral of the Ugaritic story is that the high king of the gods (Baal) has power over the unpredictable forces of nature.⁶

Genesis 1 and 2 don’t provide the Bible’s only creation story. Psalm 74 describes creation as well—as Yahweh’s victory over the forces of primeval chaos. Yahweh brought the world into order, making it habitable for humanity, his people as it were. The creation act as described in Psalm 74 was theologically crucial for establishing Yahweh’s superiority over all other gods. Baal was not king of the gods, as the Ugaritic story proclaimed—Yahweh was.

Neither was Pharaoh, or any other Egyptian deity. By linking the exodus event—the taming of the chaotic waters so that Yahweh’s people could pass through them untouched—with the creation story, the biblical writers were telegraphing a simple, potent message. Yahweh is king of all gods. He is lord of creation—not Pharaoh, who, in Egyptian theology, was responsible for maintaining creation order. The same God who created also maintains that creation, and calls it into his service when needed.⁷

It’s no wonder that [Exodus 15:11](#) has Moses, on the other side of the waters, ask: *Who is like you among the gods, Yahweh?*

No one in the ancient world, Israelite or otherwise, would have missed the theological punch. These passages left no question as to who was king of the unseen realm, and whose side that king was on. As creator, Yahweh had made the world habitable for all humanity. But the nations had been forsaken. Now the same God once again was described as subduing the forces of chaos to deliver his portion, Israel, for whom he had prepared a place of habitation—the promised land.

But before getting to the land, Yahweh needed to teach his people a few things. It’s time for some theology lessons at a place called Mount Sinai, Yahweh’s new earthly abode, headquarters of his unseen council.

Retooling the Template

THE EXODUS EVENT, THE DELIVERANCE FROM BONDAGE IN EGYPT, WAS THE catalyst for Israel's transition from a people to a nation. Any good commentary or guide to the Bible will flag that. But there's a good deal more going on. Over the next three chapters we'll see that events shortly after the exodus hark back to Eden and the divine council backdrop in some amazing ways.

God's Edenic vision began with his announcement that humankind was his image. Yahweh had divine sons; he would also have a human family. Genesis told us that God had a divine council of imagers who represented his authority in the unseen realm and participated in his rule. It also showed us that God planned a mirror-council on earth, this time composed of human imagers. These two family-administrations were together in his presence. Heaven had come to earth at Eden. Humanity was charged with extending the earthly presence and rule of God throughout the whole earth. God wanted to live and rule with all his children in his new creation.

Genesis 3–11 makes it clear that humanity failed miserably. Free will in the hands of imperfect beings comes with that risk. But the incident at Babel, foolish and self-willed as it was, shows us that there's an Edenic yearning in the human heart, a desire for utopia and a sense of divine presence. But God would not trade his own version of Eden for humanity's. He punished the nations with disinheritance. He would create a new people as his own portion. That inheritance was begun in covenant with Abraham and passed on through his family.

God delivered that family from bondage under Moses. Egypt and its gods were defeated. What was corrupted in Eden and counterfeited in the days of the flood and Babel was quickened to life on the other side of the waters of chaos.

ISRAEL IS MY SON

Yahweh's perception of Israel is clear: "Israel is my son, my firstborn" ([Exod 4:22](#)); "Out of Egypt I called my son" ([Hos 11:1](#)). As Abraham, Yahweh's portion ([Deut 32:9](#)), had been the new Adam, so Israel, the collective progeny of Abraham, was also the new Adam. Adam was Yahweh's son. Israel was Yahweh's son.

That may not seem profound, but it is. Once you realize that this pattern continues through the remainder of the Bible, the messaging becomes clear. Eventually, God will refer to the king of Israel as his son ([Psa 2:7](#)). The ultimate future king, the messiah, since he will sit on the seat of David, must be Yahweh's son as well. And since we, glorified believers, will sit on that throne too, sharing that rule ([Rev 3:21](#)), we are God's sons, his children. Every believer is also Abraham's offspring by faith ([Gal 3:26–29](#)). We are the current *and* eschatological sons of God. Our status began with Adam, was rescued in Abraham, and was fulfilled in Jesus, heir to David's throne.

These connections are actually among the more obvious. There is more that extends from Israel's sonship all the way to our glory.

BELIEVING ISRAEL: God's Earthly Council

Recall that in our discussion of [Deuteronomy 32:8–9](#) I mentioned that the number of nations disinherited by Yahweh at the judgment of Babel was seventy.¹ The number is telling. Israel’s nearest religious competition, the worship of El, Baal, and Asherah at Ugarit and in Canaan, held that their divine council had seventy sons. When Yahweh disinherited the nations and allotted them to the sons of God, a theological gauntlet was thrown down: Yahweh *alone* commands the nations and their gods. Other gods serve *him*.

The exodus story follows that theological punch in the nose with another. Not only is Israel Yahweh’s son and portion on earth, but Israel is to be governed by a special group of *seventy* under Moses and, later, the Israelite king who is Yahweh’s enthroned son.

Shortly after crossing through the sea, Moses and Israel encountered Jethro. The account is recorded in Exodus 18. Seeing the throngs, Jethro advises Moses to select men to help him govern the people. No number is given in that passage, but later, in Exodus 24, we read:

¹ And to Moses he [Yahweh] said, “Go up to Yahweh—you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy from the elders of Israel—and you will worship at a distance.”² And Moses alone will come near to Yahweh, and they will not come near, and the people will not go up with him...

⁹ And Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy from the elders of Israel went up. ¹⁰ And they saw the God of Israel, and what was under his feet was like sapphire tile work and like the very heavens for clearness ([Exod 24:1–2, 9–10](#)).

The wording suggests that these seventy elders were drawn from a larger group—as were the *elohim* of Yahweh’s council, who were given different ranks and tasks. Not every member of the divine council has equal rank.² The sons of God with authority over the nations were assigned that role, but they became corrupt and are the object of the sentencing of Psalm 82.³

The correspondences are deliberate. The seventy nations were placed under the dominion of lesser gods in the wake of Yahweh’s judgment of the nations at the Tower of Babel. Yahweh’s own kingdom is structured with a single leader (Moses for now), with whom he speaks directly, and a council of seventy. Historically, this leadership structure would continue into Jesus’ day, as the Jewish Sanhedrin, led by the high priest, numbered seventy.

We’re more interested in the theological messaging. In terms of biblical theology, the imagery has a distinct meaning. God is starting his intended Edenic rule with Israel. Israel will have a single earthly leader (eventually the messianic king, the ultimate offspring of Eve) and a council of seventy. The number telegraphs that, as the kingdom of God is re-established on earth, the seventy nations will be reclaimed, a process that began with the ministry of Jesus and will continue to the end of days.⁴

The ultimate outcome of the reclaiming of the nations under Yahweh is suggested in passages that transparently relate to the divine council. Loyal members of Yahweh’s council are themselves referred to as his elders in [Isaiah 24:23](#), the context of which is clearly eschatological:

²¹ “On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth.... ²³ Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders”([Isa 24:21, 23](#) ESV).⁵

That setting makes sense, given the divine council scene of Revelation 4–5, where the twenty-four

elders surround God's throne.⁶ The teaching point is profound: The corrupt sons of God who currently dominate the nations will be replaced by loyal members of God's family.

But which family? The New Testament explains that.

HEIRS OF THE COSMOS

Since the Church, the corporate body of believers, inherited the promises given to Abraham ([Gal 3:26–29](#)), believers are the “true Israel” the New Testament talks about. When we inherit rule of the nations with Jesus at the end of days ([Rev 3:21](#)), we will displace the corrupted divine sons of God presently ruling the nations, who are under judgment (Psa 82). We are already, but not yet, Yahweh's new council on earth. The apostle John captures the spirit of the point:

But as many as received him—to those who believe in his name—he gave to them authority to become children of God ([John 1:12](#)).

See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called children of God, and we are! ([1 John 3:1](#)).

This structuring helps us make sense of something else Paul said. The rulership of the nations was a higher-ranking task than being a messenger (the meaning of the word *angel*). The destiny of believers who will share Jesus' throne and the rule of nations is the backdrop for Paul's statement that Christians should stop letting the world's courts resolve their disputes. In [1 Corinthians 6:3](#) he protests: “Do you not know that we will judge angels?” When we are made divine (glorified) on the new earth, *we will outrank angels*. Believers are God's once and future family, once and future council, once and future rulers with Jesus over all the nations. Israel's release propels this theology.

The glorified, divine aspect of Yahweh's human family-council is telegraphed in other ways.

The divine sons of God are called the “morning stars” in [Job 38:7](#) and “the stars of God” in [Isaiah 14:13](#). The imagery of Joseph's dream, where the sons of Jacob (Israel) are stars ([Gen 37:9](#)), is no accident. Neither is it a coincidence that Abraham's offspring will be “as the stars.” While that phrase speaks of a numerical multitude of offspring, that isn't its *only* message.

Star language speaks of divinity or glorification elsewhere. In Revelation, Jesus himself, the morning star, and angels are identified with star language to denote their divine, nonearthly, nature ([Rev 1:20](#); [22:16](#); cf. [2:28](#)). As Daniel says, the righteous will “shine like the brightness of the sky above ... like the stars, forever and ever” ([Dan 12:2–3](#)). Our inheritance of the nations with Jesus at the end of days ([Rev 3:21](#)) is in a glorified, resurrected—divine—state. The star language of Genesis 15 has an eschatological connotation.

In Romans, Paul was tracking on this idea. Scholars have noticed with interest his slight change of the language of Genesis 15, God's promises to Abraham, in Romans 4.⁷ In [Genesis 15:5](#) the embodied Yahweh “brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them.’ And he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ ” Paul refers to the verse twice in Romans 4.

So that [Abraham] became the father of many nations, according to what was said, “so will your descendants be” ([Rom 4:18](#)).

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants, that he would be heir of the world [Greek:

kosmos], was not through the law, but through the righteousness by faith ([Rom 4:13](#)).

A few observations are in order. For Paul, Abraham did not become the father of just Israel, but of *many nations*. The point of course harks back to his theology in Galatians 3, where all believers, Jew or Gentile, are “Abraham’s seed” ([Gal 3:26–29](#)).

The notion of Abraham’s offspring becoming “heir of the world” speaks to rulership of the nations by those offspring. The corrupt divine sons of God of [Deuteronomy 32:8](#) would be displaced by new divine sons of God—glorified believers.⁸

Paul’s logic makes sense if believers are Yahweh’s children, especially given the merging of humanity with the divine presence back in Eden. Even now we are “sharers of the divine nature” ([2 Pet 1:4](#)), but one day we will be made like Jesus ([1 John 3:1–3](#); [1 Cor 15:35–49](#)) and rule with him over the nations. Believers, the spiritual offspring of Abraham, will ultimately reverse the disinheritance of the nations along with the curse of death that extended from Eden’s failure.

EDEN AND SINAI

In Genesis, Eden was Yahweh’s home and the meeting place of his divine council. God had since changed addresses. Sinai was now his domain—and where Israel was now headed.

Earlier we discovered that Eden was the dwelling place and headquarters of the divine council.⁹ We were reminded of the description of Eden in Genesis as a lush *garden* with four rivers ([Gen 2:10–14](#)). Eden was also a *mountain* ([Ezek 28:13–14](#)), the administrative “seat of the gods” ([Ezek 28:2](#)), situated in “the heart of the seas” ([Ezek 28:2](#)), a description that reiterated the well-watered imagery of the council headquarters. The gods lived in the best or most remote places. That earlier discussion noted some connections between Eden and Mount Zion. It’s time to take a look at connections with Sinai.¹⁰

The fact that Eden is referred to as both a garden and a mountain in [Ezekiel 28:13–14](#) is significant. It provides a clear conceptual link between Eden and the holy mountain of God, Sinai.¹¹

We’ve actually already gotten a hint that Sinai is God’s home and meeting place. In the passage about the seventy elders ([Exod 24:9–11](#)), Yahweh appeared in human form, as he had to the patriarchs and Moses. But this time the seventy earthly elders are along for the meeting. The council room has been reserved for the seventy from Israel.

Sinai as Yahweh’s throne room is telegraphed in other ways. Exodus 24 notes that Yahweh was seated and that under his feet was a pavement of shining sapphire stone, “like the very heavens for clearness” ([Exod 24:10](#)). Again, light speaks of divine presence. This imagery is repeated in other passages and expanded to include fire, smoke, flashing light, lightning, and loud noises ([Exod 19:16, 18; 20:18; Deut 5:4–5, 22–26](#)).

All of these elements are found in familiar visions of Yahweh on his throne ([Isa 6](#); [Ezek 1](#); [Dan 7](#); [Psa 18](#)). These passages employ the same imagery whether Yahweh is enthroned in the spiritual realm or on earth. Heaven and earth are connected. Yahweh rules both.

Some of these passages have the divine council, the heavenly host, present. That’s to be expected in view of other Eden-Sinai connections. For example, in the throne room scene of Daniel 7 we read:

⁹ As I looked,
thrones were placed,

and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.

10 A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened (vv. 9–10 ESV).

This is one of the more explicit divine council texts in the Old Testament. There are *multiple thrones* in this heavenly scene, along with the single throne occupied by the Ancient of Days, the God of Israel.¹² There is a clear reference to the council—the word translated “court” here refers to a judicial body.¹³

There’s another fascinating Sinai passage that links the divine council to the mountain and also the thing that the mountain is perhaps best known for—the giving of the law. That might sound odd. In my experience, most people have Charlton Heston in their mind’s eye when you bring up Sinai and the law, and there aren’t any angels in that scene. But if the divine council isn’t associated with the law, how do we handle verses like these?

52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it (Acts 7:52–53 ESV).

1 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb 2:1–3a ESV).

The Law delivered by angels? Hollywood wasn’t exactly following the biblical script very closely. We’ll set the record straight in the next chapter.

God's Law, God's Council

I'LL ADMIT, IT'S A LITTLE HARD TO GET EXCITED ABOUT THE LAW OF GOD. How many of us would echo Paul's sentiment, that he delighted in the law of God in his heart ([Rom 7:22](#))? We certainly don't think of the law like David did:

⁷ The law of Yahweh is perfect, reviving life.

The testimony of Yahweh is firm, making wise the simple.

⁸ The precepts of Yahweh are right, making the heart rejoice.

The command of Yahweh is pure, enlightening the eyes ([Psa 19:7–8](#)).

We tend to think of the law as though every one of its 663 commands were an oppressive lynchpin in a relationship to Yahweh. We tend to view the law negatively, as though it were given to produce feelings of guilt or to frustrate Israelites with the impossibility of pleasing God. This is misguided. The laws of the Torah broadly deal with a person's relationship to Yahweh (e.g., worship, access to sacred space),¹ relationships with fellow Israelites or outsiders (e.g., sex, business, property), and the nation's covenantal bond with her God. The law was not a means of *meriting* salvation. An Israelite would have known that believing was at the heart of right relationship with Yahweh, not mere mechanical observance of a list of do's and don'ts. For sure some Israelites would have lapsed into this mistaken thinking, particularly after the shock of the exile, but that wasn't what the law was about.²

In other words, legalism was not intrinsic to a biblical theology of the law. The heart of salvation in biblical theology—across both testaments—is *believing loyalty* to Yahweh. That orientation extends from Eden and has deep roots in what happened at Sinai. It is no coincidence that when Israel, Yahweh's portion, met with him at Sinai, the result was a second covenant involving laws binding Israel and Yahweh in faithfulness, witnessed by the members of Yahweh's divine council.

THE COSMIC MOUNTAIN: Birthplace of the Law

In the last chapter we were introduced to the connections between Eden and Sinai. Both were sacred places where Yahweh's children saw him in human form ([Gen 3:8](#); [Exod 24:9–11](#)). We ended our discussion with the provocative notion that the divine council was present at God's mountain, specifically during the giving of the law.

The link between the law and the heavenly council is noted several times in the New Testament, which uses for the divine council the umbrella term “angels.” I closed the last chapter with two passages that described the law as “delivered by angels” ([Acts 7:53](#)) and “declared by angels” ([Heb 2:2](#)).³

When I first came across these New Testament verses, I had read a lot of the Old Testament and had never before seen this idea, so I naturally wondered where the New Testament writers were getting it. It's actually a prickly problem. There are passages that describe angels at Sinai, but none of them specifically reference the law.

For example, [Psalm 68:15–18](#) reads:

- 15 A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan;
a mountain of many peaks is the mountain of Bashan.
- 16 Why do you look with hostility, O many-peaked mountains?
This mountain God desires for his dwelling.
Yes, Yahweh will abide in it forever.
- 17 The chariots of God⁴
are twice ten thousand, with thousands doubled.
The Lord is among them at Sinai, distinctive in victory.
- 18 You have ascended on high; you have led away captives.⁵
You have received gifts from among humankind,
and even from the rebellious, so that Yah⁶ God may dwell there.

Without direct reference to the law, the New Testament idea in Acts 7 and Hebrews 2 seems completely contrived—unless you’re using as your Old Testament the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was the Bible of the early church.

A second Sinai passage that is a key text for connecting the law and the heavenly host is [Deuteronomy 33:1–4](#). The Septuagint version has a multitude of divine beings at Sinai whereas the traditional Hebrew text does not. That isn’t the only divergence, either. Take a look at the passage in both versions, especially the underlined words:⁷

Traditional (Masoretic) Hebrew Text	Septuagint
Now this is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. Then he said, “Yahweh came from Sinai, and he dawned upon them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran, and he came with myriads of holy ones, at his right hand a fiery law for them. Moreover, he loves his people, all the holy ones were in your hand, and they bowed down to your feet, each one accepted directions from you. A law Moses instructed for us, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob.	And this is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death. He said: The Lord has come from Sinai, and he appeared to us from Seir; he made haste from Mount Paran with ten thousands of Kadesh, at his right, his angels with him. And he had pity on his people, and all the holy ones were under your hands; even these were under you; and it [the people] received his words, the law which Moses commanded us, an inheritance for the assemblies of Jacob.

The fundamental difference is that the Septuagint version has angels at Sinai (v. [2](#)) and the traditional text doesn’t. In verse [3](#) the traditional Hebrew text seems to suggest that “the holy ones” are the Israelites who will receive the law. The Septuagint has angels at God’s right hand—the position of authority—witnessing the giving of the law to Israel.⁸

Since the New Testament writers most often used the Septuagint when referencing the Old Testament, we can understand the point being made in [Acts 7:52–53](#) and [Hebrews 2:1–2](#).

However, [Galatians 3:19](#) (ESV) adds a tantalizing detail that makes the connection more dramatic:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

[Galatians 3:19](#) informs us that there was an intermediary between God, the angels, and Israel. Most scholars assume this is a reference to Moses. Other scholars have noted that, in light of the very next verse, this is problematic (“Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one”). Why

would Paul feel the need to clarify that God’s uniqueness wasn’t disturbed by this intermediary if it was just Moses?⁹

There is another solution, one that explains Paul’s ensuing comment: The intermediary is Yahweh in human form.¹⁰

Deuteronomy 33 uses language requiring the appearance of Yahweh in human form (“appeared”; “his right”). In this light, [Deuteronomy 9:9–10](#) takes on new significance.¹¹ Moses says:

⁹ When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that Yahweh made with you, and remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights, I did not eat food and I did not drink water. ¹⁰ And Yahweh gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them was writing according to all the words that Yahweh spoke with you at the mountain, from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.

This language is by now very familiar—the language of human physicality (“finger”) applied to Yahweh. This is the stock description of the second Yahweh, the Angel. It shouldn’t be a surprise that the New Testament speaks of angelic mediation for the law—it was written by the Angel who is God in the presence of council members (“the holy ones”) and then dispensed to Israel through Moses.

THE SINAI LAW COVENANT AND ITS WITNESSES

The core idea of the law being “delivered” and “declared” by angels is depicted in [Deuteronomy 33:1–4](#). The divine beings of Yahweh’s council witness the agreement.¹² This information is provided somewhat cryptically, at least to our eye. We need to read closely and, to some degree, in Hebrew to catch the clues.

Scholars agree that the events of Sinai after the exodus established a covenant between Yahweh and his people Israel. Covenants were basically agreements or enactments of a relationship. Yahweh’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was prompted by the earlier covenant promises he had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ([Gen 12:1–3](#); [15:1–6](#); [22:18](#); [26:4](#); [27:29](#); [28:14](#)). The events leading up to the miraculous deliverance from Egypt alluded to the earlier promises ([Exod 3:7–8](#), [16–22](#); [6:4–6](#); [13:5](#), [11](#)). Abraham’s offspring had become a multitude in Egypt ([Exod 1:6–10](#)) and, as God had told Abraham centuries earlier, had become strangers in a foreign land ([Gen 15:13](#)). God had rescued them and now, at Sinai, was setting the terms of the relationship.

The covenant between Yahweh and Israel enacted at Sinai follows the conventions of a type of covenant known from ancient Near Eastern sources. Scholars refer to it as a vassal treaty.¹³ This type of covenant was, in essence, an oath of loyalty by an inferior (the vassal, here Israel) to a superior (Yahweh, the initiator of the agreement).

The basic stipulations of the covenant relationship were what we know as the Ten Commandments ([Exod 20](#)), though there are other laws in Exodus 20–23. As with the earlier, Abrahamic covenant ([Gen 15:9–10](#)), a sacrificial ritual was performed to ratify the covenant ([Exod 24:3–8](#)). After the ritual there was a sacrificial meal *between the parties involved*. This was the divine council scene in [Exodus 24:9–11](#) that we’ve already briefly noted.

A formal vassal treaty in the ancient Near East regularly listed “third party” witnesses to its enactment. As one scholar notes, “the witnesses were exclusively deities or deified elements of the natural world.... All gods relevant to *both* parties were called upon as witnesses, so that there was

no god left that the vassal could appeal to for protection if he wanted to violate his solemn oath.”¹⁴ The gods were “covenant enforcers” in this worldview.

Israelites of course would not have recognized foreign gods in such a treaty. Consequently most scholars consider this element absent in the Sinai treaty account. But the *elohim* of Yahweh’s council were not foreign gods. They were Yahweh’s host and witness to the giving of the law, at least according to the Hebrew text behind the Septuagint and the New Testament writers. They were also, as the account of Ahab in 1 Kings 22 indicates, Yahweh’s means of punishing covenant apostates.

It is at precisely this point that many scholars have failed to notice some relevant wordplay in the biblical text that also suggests this connection.

The tablets of the law are referred to frequently in Exodus by the term *’edut*.¹⁵ It is usually translated “testimony” in English Bibles. The term is used in parallel with *torah* (“law”) in [Psalms 19:7](#) and [78:5](#), so at the very least it speaks of the written text of the law. [Exodus 25:16](#) informs us that Yahweh commanded Moses to place the *’edut* in the ark of the covenant. In fact, the ark was made for the *’edut*. This explains why the ark is also called the “ark of the *’edut*” (e.g., [Exod 25:22](#); [30:6](#), [26](#); [39:35](#); [40:3](#), [5](#), [21](#)). Since the ark traveled inside the tabernacle, that mobile tent structure was also called “the tabernacle of the *’edut*” ([Exod 38:21](#); [Num 1:50](#), [53](#); [10:11](#)) or the “tent of the *’edut*” ([Num 9:15](#); [17:7–8](#); [18:2](#); [2 Chr 24:6](#)).

What makes this interesting is that the term *’edut* can also mean “witnesses.”¹⁶ In fact, this plural’s equivalent in Akkadian, the language of the vassal treaties that serve as the model for the Sinai treaty in Exodus, is a technical term used exclusively of witnesses to such treaties.¹⁷

This is not to suggest that the term doesn’t refer to the laws on the tablets. Rather, since the tablets themselves occupy sacred space reserved only for Yahweh’s presence (inside the ark within the holy of holies), the term appears to signify that the tablets of the law were also a sort of proxy for the divine council members who witnessed the event. In other words, the tablets of law were tokens of the event at Sinai itself. They were stone reminders of a divine encounter with Yahweh and his council, in much the same way that altars and standing stones built by the patriarchs would have reminded passersby that they marked a divine encounter ([Gen 12:7](#); [13:18](#); [Exod 17:15](#); [24:4](#)).

Again, Yahweh’s presence *in his home* (Eden, Sinai, tabernacle, and eventually the temple) implies by definition his throne room along with his attending council. The tablets not only contained the covenant terms but were a reminder of the event as it occurred, with the divine council present on Sinai.

THE LAW AND SALVATION

In simplest terms, the Sinai covenant conveyed Yahweh’s will for what he intended Israel to be—in relation both to him and to the disinherited nations. Israel was to be theologically and ethically distinct. These distinctions were obligations, not suggestions. Israel was to be holy ([Lev 19:2](#)) and fulfill God’s original Edenic purpose of spreading his influence (his kingdom rule) throughout all the nations.

Israel’s status as Yahweh’s own portion was not an end in itself, but the means by which Israel would draw all nations back to Yahweh ([Deut 4:6–8](#); [28:9–10](#)). This is the idea behind Israel being a “kingdom of priests” ([Exod 19:6](#)) and “a light to the nations” ([Isa 42:6](#); [49:6](#); [51:4](#); [60:3](#)). It’s no

wonder that the book of Revelation uses the same language of believers in [Revelation 5:10](#), a divine council scene, in connection with ruling over all the earth. The entire nation inherited the status and duty of Abraham, that through him—and now them—all nations would be blessed ([Gen 12:3](#)).

But did this salvation come by obeying rules? To ask the question is to miss the point. Salvation in the Old Testament meant love for Yahweh alone. One had to *believe* that Yahweh was the God of all gods, trusting that this Most High God had chosen covenant relationship with Israel to the detriment of all other nations. The law was how one demonstrated that love—that *loyalty*. Salvation was not merited. Yahweh alone had initiated the relationship. Yahweh's choice and covenant promise had to be *believed*. An Israelite's *believing loyalty* was shown by faithfulness to the law.

The core of the law was fidelity to Yahweh alone, above all gods. To worship other gods was to demonstrate the absence of belief, love, and loyalty. Doing the works of the law without having the heart aligned only to Yahweh was inadequate. This is why the promise of the possession of the promised land is repeatedly and inextricably linked in the Torah to the first two commandments (i.e., staying clear of idolatry and apostasy).¹⁸

The history of Israel's kings illustrates the point. King David was guilty of the worst of crimes against humanity in the incident with Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11). He was clearly in violation of the law and deserving of death. Nevertheless, his belief in who Yahweh was among all gods never wavered. God was merciful to him, sparing him from death, though his sin had consequences the rest of his life. But there was no doubt that David was ever a believer in Yahweh and never worshiped another. Yet other kings of Israel and Judah were tossed aside and both kingdoms sent into exile—because they worshiped other gods. Personal failure, even of the worst kind, did not send the nation into exile. Choosing other gods did.

The same is true in the New Testament. Believing the gospel means believing that Yahweh, the God of Israel, came to earth incarnated as a man, voluntarily died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin, and rose again on the third day. That is the content of our faith this side of the cross. Our believing loyalty is demonstrated by our obedience to “the law of Christ” ([1 Cor 9:21](#); [Gal 6:2](#)). We cannot worship another. Salvation means believing loyalty to Christ, who was and is the visible Yahweh. There is no salvation in any other name ([Acts 4:12](#)), and faith must remain intact ([Rom 11:17–24](#); [Heb 3:19](#); [10:22](#), [38–39](#)). Personal failure is not the same as trading Jesus for another god—and God knows that.

Believing loyalty was therefore not just academic. By definition it must be conscious and active. Israel knew that her God had fought for her and loved her, but the relationship came with expectations. As she embarked for the promised land, Israel would have daily, visible reminders not only of Yahweh's presence but of his total *otherness*. Having the divine presence with you could be both fantastic and frightening.

Realm Distinction

WE’VE BEEN TRACKING THE STORY OF YAHWEH AND HIS PORTION, ABRAHAM’S descendants. Yahweh chose to disinherit the nations at Babel. He chose to appear to Abraham in visible, human form to initiate a covenant relationship. He chose to reiterate that covenant with Isaac and Jacob, whom he renamed Israel. And he chose to deliver Israel from Egypt.

These choices telegraphed theological messages. Israel existed because Yahweh had supernaturally enabled the birth of Isaac. They continued to exist because Yahweh wanted a people on earth by his own plan and by his own power. The lesser *elohim* he had placed over the disinherited nations—particularly those in Egypt at this point of the story—cannot prevent his will. *There is no god like Yahweh*. His goal of making the earth a new Eden will not be overturned.

Before the plagues and the exodus from Egypt, the descendants of Jacob knew Yahweh only by reputation and oral storytelling. Now they were at his mountain, ready to journey to the land he had taken for himself, and for them. They had the tablets of the law, but that was just a starting point. Egypt and her gods had been defeated, but the conflict with the gods and their nations was just beginning. Israel needed to understand that being Yahweh’s portion meant separation from the gods and the nations who stood ready to oppose them. The concept of realm distinction was fundamental to the supernatural worldview of ancient Israel.

HOLINESS AND SACRED SPACE

Yahweh is an *elohim*, not a mortal man. Appearing as a human being was a condescension that enabled the lesser minds of mortals to comprehend his presence—and live to tell about it. Yahweh is so *other* as to be incomprehensible without the façade of something familiar. And yet for Israel, his otherness would need to remain an ever-present reality, sensed at all times.

The concept of *otherness* was at the core of Israelite identity. Otherness is the core of holiness. The Hebrew vocabulary for holiness means to be set apart or to be distinct. While the idea has a moral dimension related to conduct, it is not intrinsically about morality. It is about *distinction*. Israel’s identification with Yahweh by virtue of his covenant with Abraham and the terms of the covenant at Sinai meant that, as [Leviticus 19:2](#) concisely summarizes, Israelites were to be set apart (“holy”) as Yahweh was set apart (“holy”).¹

Yahweh’s complete otherness was reinforced in the minds of Israelites through worship and sacrifice. Yahweh was not only the source of Israel’s life—he *was* life. Yahweh was complete in his perfections. Yahweh was not of earth, a place where there is death, disease, and imperfection. His realm is supernatural; ours is terrestrial. The space he occupies is sacred and made otherworldly by his presence. The space we occupy is “profane” or ordinary. Yahweh is the antithesis of ordinary. Humans must be invited and purified to occupy the same space.

Many laws in the Torah illustrate this worldview and its messaging. Whether priest or not, male or female, people could be disqualified from sacred space by a variety of activities and conditions. Examples include sexual activity, bodily emissions, physical handicaps, contact with a dead body,

and childbirth.²

The logic of such exclusions is simple, yet foreign to our modern clinical minds. Sexual intercourse, emission of sexual fluids, uterine discharges, and menstruation were not considered unclean out of prudishness. Rather, the concept was that the body had lost the fluids that contain, create, and sustain life.³ That which is not whole and is associated with loss of life cannot enter Yahweh's presence until ritual restoration rectified that status. The same reasoning is behind the ritually unclean status of those with physical handicaps, infected with a disease, and who have touched a corpse, animal or human.⁴ Yahweh's presence meant life and perfection, not death and defectiveness. These laws kept the community conscious of Yahweh's *otherness*.

Regulations governing the sanctity of Yahweh's dwelling provided concrete object lessons about realm distinction. The ground that that dwelling encompassed was sacred space in relationship to the people of Israel. The separateness of the divine realm was reinforced by the laws that allowed or disallowed proximity to Yahweh. These permissions or prohibitions even extended to inanimate objects associated with Yahweh and his service.⁵

Even within sacred space there were gradations of holiness or sanctity.⁶ The closer one got to Yahweh's presence, the more holy the ground or the object in his proximity. The terms that describe the layout of the structure are evidence of this progression. From the entrance inward there was the court, the holy place, and the "most holy place" ("holy of holies"). The sacred space of the tabernacle got progressively more holy from the entrance to the innermost room.

The progressive "holiness zones" were also distinguished by the priestly clothing associated with them (Exod 28–29).⁷ For example, the high priest, the person with permitted access to the holiest place, wore a unique ephod, breastplate, and headdress inscribed with "holy to Yahweh." The holier the zone, the more costly the animal sacrificed to sanctify the priests when they entered into the presence of Yahweh for rituals (Lev 8).

THE TABERNACLE: Heaven on Earth

That Yahweh dwelled in a tent before the construction of the temple (much later, during the time of Solomon) is important for marking sacred space. The tabernacle (Hebrew: *mishkan*—"dwelling") was the place where Yahweh would cause his name—his presence—to dwell.⁸

As the divine abode, the tabernacle was also analogous to Eden. Like Eden, the tabernacle was cosmic in conception, the place where heaven and earth met, a veritable microcosm of the Edenic creation where God first dwelt on earth.⁹

There are many subtle connections between Eden and the tabernacle,¹⁰ some of them discernible only in the Hebrew text. For our purposes, several of the more obvious are worth noting.

To begin, the description of the tabernacle as a tent dwelling is significant. Elsewhere in the biblical world, deities and their councils were considered to live in tents—atop their cosmic mountains and in their lush gardens.¹¹ The tent of the god or gods was, as with mountains or lush gardens, the place where heaven and earth intersected and where divine decrees were issued. This was a common cultural idea, perhaps akin to how many people think of church—church is a place you'd expect to meet God, or where God can be found.

Moses was told to construct the tabernacle and its equipment according to the pattern shown to

him by Yahweh on the holy mountain ([Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30](#)).¹² The implication is that the tabernacle on earth was to be a copy of the heavenly tent in accord with the religious principle of “as in heaven, so on earth.”

The heavenly tent prototype was the heavens themselves, as [Isaiah 40:22](#) tells us (“It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in” [ESV]). This kind of language is also why the earth is referred to as God’s footstool ([Isa 66:1](#)). Yahweh sits above the circle of the earth, in his heavenly tent, on his throne above the waters which are above “the firmament,” and rests his feet on the earth, which is his footstool ([Job 9:8; Psa 104:2](#)).

As Eden was the place where humanity experienced the presence of God, so too was the tabernacle. This was particularly true for the priests, but God’s presence occasionally met Israel’s leaders outside the holy of holies ([Lev 9:23](#); Num 12:5–19; [20:6](#); [Deut 31:15](#)), the most obvious instance being the glory cloud ([Exod 40:34–35](#)).

The menorah (“lampstand”) in the tabernacle is a striking analogy with the tree of life in Eden.¹³ The lampstand was fashioned in the appearance of a tree ([Exod 25:31–36](#)) and was stationed directly outside the holy of holies.

The cherubim inside the holy of holies are also a clear connection to Eden.¹⁴ The Edenic cherubim stood guard at the dwelling place of God in Eden. Their position atop the lid to the ark of the covenant is not coincidental. The innermost sanctum of the tabernacle was the place from which God would govern Israel. The cherubim form a throne for the invisible Yahweh. Later, when the tent of the most holy place was moved into the temple, two giant cherubim were installed within for Yahweh’s throne, making the ark his footstool.¹⁵

Lastly, as Beale notes, “The entrance to Eden was from the east ([Gen 3:24](#)), which was also the direction from which one entered the tabernacle and later the temples of Israel. [Genesis 2:12](#) says that ‘good gold’ and ‘bdellium and onyx stone’ were in ‘the land of Havilah,’ apparently where Eden was. Of course, various items of tabernacle furniture were made of gold, as were the walls, ceiling, and floor of the holy of holies in Solomon’s Temple ([1 Kgs 6:20–22](#)).”¹⁶

SACRIFICE AND ISRAEL’S COSMIC GEOGRAPHY

One Israelite ritual in particular illustrates realm distinction. In the context of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, which has the nations under the dominion of lesser gods, the entire Israelite camp was cosmic geography and sacred space. Israel was identified with Yahweh. Both the people and the land that Yahweh had determined would belong to the descendants of Abraham were Yahweh’s “portion” ([Deut 4:19–20; 32:8–9](#)).

The Day of Atonement ritual ([Lev 16](#)) provides a fascinating convergence of these ideas. Part of that ritual’s description goes like this:

⁷ And [Aaron] shall take the two goats, and he shall present them before Yahweh at the tent of assembly’s entrance. ⁸ Then Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats: one lot for Yahweh and one for Azazel. ⁹ And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot for Yahweh fell, and he shall sacrifice it as a sin offering. ¹⁰ But he must present alive before Yahweh the goat on which the lot for Azazel fell to make atonement for himself, to send it away into the desert to Azazel.

Why is one of the goats “for Azazel”? Who or what is “Azazel”? The passage is inexplicable unless you’re acquainted with the cosmic geographical ideas we’ve been talking about.

The word “Azazel” in the Hebrew text can be translated “the goat that goes away.” This is the justification for the common “scapegoat” translation in some English versions (NIV, NASB, KJV). The scapegoat, so the translator has it, symbolically carries the sins of the people away from the camp of Israel into the wilderness. Seems simple enough.

However, “Azazel” is really a proper name. In [Lev 16:8](#) one goat is “for Yahweh,” while the other goat is “for Azazel.” Since Yahweh is a proper name and the goats are described in the same way, Hebrew parallelism informs us that Azazel is also a proper name. What needs resolution is what it means.

Azazel is regarded as the name of a demon in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient Jewish books.¹⁷ In fact, in one scroll (4Q 180, 1:8) Azazel is the leader of the angels that sinned in [Genesis 6:1–4](#). The same description appears in the book of 1 Enoch (8:1; 9:6; 10:4–8; 13:1; 54:5–6; 55:4; 69:2).

Recall that in intertestamental Judaism, the offending sons of God from Genesis 6 were believed to have been imprisoned in a pit or abyss in the netherworld. Azazel’s realm was somewhere out in the desert, outside the confines of holy ground. It was a place associated with supernatural evil.

The Old Testament itself does not state that Azazel was a demon. Scholars have, however, connected the name to Mot, the god of death.¹⁸ The identification of the term with a demon may also derive from cosmic geography and an association of the wilderness with the forces of chaos, which are hostile to God.¹⁹ This would make sense on several levels, as the desert would not only be a place forbidding to life but, as ground outside the camp of Israel and Yahweh, the source of life, would have a clear association with chaos.

[Leviticus 17:7](#) suggests that Israelites saw the desert as spiritually sinister: “So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore” (ESV). We are not told why they did this, but the placement of this problem in proximity to the ritual goat to Azazel suggests a conceptual connection. Jews of later periods certainly made such connections.²⁰

In the Day of Atonement ritual, the goat for Yahweh—the goat that was sacrificed—purges the impurities caused by the people of Israel and purifies the sanctuary. The goat for Azazel was sent away after the sins of the Israelites were symbolically placed on it.

The point of the goat for Azazel was not that something was owed to the demonic realm, as though a ransom was being paid.²¹ The goat for Azazel banished the sins of the Israelites to the realm *outside* Israel. Why? Because the ground on which Yahweh had his dwelling was holy. Sin had to be “transported” to where evil belonged—the territory outside Israel, under the control of gods set over the pagan nations. The high priest was not sacrificing *to Azazel*. Rather, Azazel was getting what belonged to him: sin.

The concept of realm distinction and cosmic geography go hand in hand. Every day ancient Israel’s journey to the promised land reiterated some point in regard to who they were and their purpose on earth. The invisible Yahweh and the visible Yahweh were present as cloud and Angel, leading his people through the domain of hostile gods and their people to Israel’s own divinely allotted home. When they were camped, the glow of Yahweh’s fire over the tabernacle, Eden returned to earth, illumined the camp. They were Yahweh’s portion. The forces of chaos, seen and unseen, were on every border. One would think the living object lessons would have ensured faith when it

came time to confront those forces. But that wasn't to be.

Section Summary

The judgment at Babel made the world a very different place. Before Yahweh's disinheritance of the nations, he had been in covenant relationship with all the descendants of Noah. God had told Noah's sons to be fruitful and multiply and overspread the earth ([Gen 9:1](#)). It's no accident that these were also the words given to Adam and Eve ([Gen 1:22, 28](#)). The sons of Noah were to expand God's human family and carry on the original goal of an Edenic world. Babel undermined all that.

In response, Yahweh made the nations outsiders. If his will was too burdensome, then they could serve other gods. Yahweh would transfer the Edenic dream to someone else—a people who didn't yet exist, but soon would.

Yahweh came to Abraham in human form, just as he had with Adam and Eve ([Gen 3:8](#)). The contact was personal because the interest was personal. Yahweh's kingdom rule would be built on covenant loyalty. He would remain faithful, and beginning with Abraham, all who wished to participate could do so, if they, like Abraham, believed the covenant promises and turned away from the other gods.

The promises would pass from Abraham to Isaac and then to Jacob (Israel). Yahweh's family would be preserved through Joseph, and delivered through Moses. The deliverance, of course, was a means to an end. Yahweh wanted what he had wanted from the beginning: a mingling of his heavenly and earthly families on the earth he had called into existence. To that end he brought Israel home to Sinai. One element of the original pact with Abraham had come to pass. Israel was numerous. But as yet Yahweh's people had no land and had yet to fulfill the role of blessing the nations, drawing them back to the One who had cast them aside.

One task therefore remained. Yahweh would bring Israel to Canaan, where these two covenantal promises would be fulfilled. He would also live among them in that land. To those ends, the covenant for living in the presence of God, remaining in the land, and being a kingdom of priests was enacted in the presence of witnesses, Yahweh's divine council.

When his people were threatened, whether by gods or men, Yahweh would intervene visibly as the Angel in a burning bush, the embodied Name leading Israel through the wilderness, and the Commander of Yahweh's forces on the field of battle. In a conflict between gods and men, Israel was hopelessly outnumbered, but had the God who mattered. All that was needed was believing loyalty—trust and obey.

What could go wrong?

CONQUEST AND FAILURE

Giant Problems

REVIEWING WHAT WE HAD DISCUSSED IN AN EARLIER CHAPTER, GOD HAD told Eve that her offspring would be locked in conflict with those of the serpent ([Gen 3:15](#)). The serpent was actually a divine being, not a mere member of the animal kingdom. While the flexibility of the meaning of the term *nachash* forces us to consider double (and even triple) entendre, one thing is quite clear: The divine being in the garden who rebelled against Yahweh's desire to have humans rule an Edenic world is never cast in human form.¹ Unlike the sons of God in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) who are cast as assuming human flesh and capable of cohabitation, the divine rebel of Eden does not appear to Eve that way.²

Consequently, the idea of a “seed” or offspring extending from the *nachash* would not have been literal for the biblical writer. Instead, the notion is metaphorical or spiritual. And this is precisely what we see when the phrase occurs elsewhere in the Bible. The metaphor is perhaps most clear in the New Testament, when Jesus himself referred to the Pharisees as serpents ([Matt 23:33](#)) who were “of [their] father the devil” ([John 8:44](#); cf. [Rev 12:6](#)).³

Despite the metaphorical nature of the language in the Eden story, the idea of divine beings producing human spawn who would oppose Yahweh's desires does appear in [Genesis 6:1–4](#). That passage in turn becomes grist for the biblical writers and their descriptions of the conquest of Canaan. In this and the next two chapters, we'll recapture their thinking on that part of biblical Israel's history.

The expulsion of Adam and Eve was followed by a series of episodes that pitted the descendants of Eve against the spiritual children of the original enemy. The opposition to God's plan came in both human and divine form. Cain was referenced specifically in this light ([1 John 3:12](#)—“Cain, who was of the evil one and violently murdered his brother”). [Genesis 6:1–4](#) explicitly described a transgression of the domain boundary between heaven and earth that God wanted observed. Then there was the rebellion at Babel ([Gen 11:1–9](#)).

More review: Israel was reborn as a nation in the exodus from Egypt. After receiving the law, building the tabernacle, and establishing the priesthood, they departed for the promised land.⁴ They soon arrived at the border of Canaan, where Moses sent twelve spies to reconnoiter the territory ([Num 13](#)). The spies returned with confirmation of the abundance and desirability of the land. Nevertheless, most of them were in despair. The land was occupied by people in walled cities—some of whom were giants descended from the Nephilim:

³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” ([Num 13:32–33](#) ESV).

Understanding the trauma of Israel in Numbers 13 is essential to understanding the subsequent conquest accounts. Any Israelite or Jew living after the time of the completion of the Hebrew Bible would have processed the wars for the promised land in terms of this passage, since it connected

Israel's survival as the people of Yahweh with the defeat of the Nephilim descendants.

NEPHILIM BEFORE THE FLOOD

In our earlier discussions about [Genesis 6:1–4](#) we left some questions unaddressed.⁵ How do we understand the note in [Genesis 6:4](#), that the Nephilim were upon the earth at the time of the flood “and also afterward.” How do we process their original presence?

As our earlier discussion made clear, viewpoints that strip the account of its supernatural flavor must be discarded. The events described in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) were part of Israel's supernatural worldview. We cannot pretend they saw things as most modern readers would. Since the Nephilim were part of Israel's supernatural worldview and their descendants turn out to be Israel's primary obstacle for conquering the promised land, the conquest itself must also be understood in supernatural terms.

There are two possible approaches to the origin of the Nephilim in [Genesis 6:1–4](#) that are consistent with the supernatural understanding of the sons of God in the Israelite worldview. The first and most transparent is that divine beings came to earth, assumed human flesh, cohabited with human women, and spawned unusual offspring known as Nephilim. Naturally, this view requires seeing the giant clans encountered in the conquest as physical descendants of the Nephilim ([Num 13:32–33](#)).⁶

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