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PSALM 82 IN CONTEMPORARY LATTER-DAY SAINT TRADITION

Daniel O. McClellan

The nature and function of Psalm 82 has long been a subject of debate within biblical scholarship.¹ The text is rather brief and has no real significant textual instabilities,² but it stands out within the Hebrew Bible

1 K. Budde, "Ps. 82:6f," *JBL* 40.1/2 (1921): 39–42; J. Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 14.1 (1939): 29–126; H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *JTS* 45 (1944): 155; Roger T. O'Callaghan, "A Note on the Canaanite Background of Psalm 82," *CBQ* 15 (1953): 311–14; Otto Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *JSS* 1.1 (1956): 29–30; A. Gonzalez, "Le Psaume LXXXII," *VT* 13.3 (1963): 293–309; Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *ZaW* 35.1 (1964): 29–34; James S. Ackerman, "An Exegetical Study of Psalm 82" (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1966); Matitiahu Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly: An Interpretation of Psalm 82," *HUCA* 40 (1969): 123–37; Hans-Winfried Jüngling, *Der Tod der Götter: Eine Untersuchung zum Psalm 82* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969); Cyrus H. Gordon, "History of Religion in Psalm 82," in G. A. Tuttle, ed., *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 129–31; Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 120–24; Heribret Niehr, "Götter oder Menschen — eine falsche Alternative: Bemerkungen zu Ps 82," *ZaW* 99.1 (1987): 94–98; Lowell K. Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *JSOT* 47.1 (1990): 51–66; Simon B. Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God: Psalm 82 as Myth and Liturgy," *RevBib* 102.4 (1995): 532–59; Yair Zakovitch, "Psalm 82 and Biblical Exegesis," in Chaim Cohen, et al., eds., *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 213–28; Michael Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature" (PhD diss., Univ. of Wisconsin — Madison, 2004), 74–89 (<http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu>); Michael Heiser, "Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8–9 and Psalm 82?" *Hiphil* 3 [hiphil.org/index.php/hiphil/article/view/29] (2006), accessed 3/5/2015; Robert P. Gordon, "The Gods Must Die: A Theme in Isaiah and Beyond," in M. n. van der Meer, et al., eds., *Isaiah in Context: Studies in Honour of Arie van der Kooij on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53–55; David Frankel, "El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6–8," *JHS* 10 [jhsonline.org/Articles/article_144.pdf] (2010), accessed 3/5/2015; James M. Trotter, "Death of the אֱלֹהִים in Psalm 82," *JBL* 131.2 (2012): 221–39; Brent A. Strawn, "The Poetics of Psalm 82: Three Critical Notes along with a Plea for the Poetic," *RevBib* 121.1 (2014): 21–46; Ellen White, *Yahweh's Council: Its Structure and Membership* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 24–33.

2 Although note the LXX variant for MT's בַּעֲדֵת־אֱלֹהִים ("in the divine council/assembly of El/God") in v. 1: ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν, "in the assembly of the gods," perhaps indicating עֲדַת־אֱלֹהִים in the source text (see R. B. Salters, "Psalm 82,1 and the Septuagint," *ZaW* 103.2 [1991]: 225–39).

as a text particularly steeped in mythological imagery. Precritical exegetes understood the gods of the narrative to be human judges, but subsequent textual discoveries and concomitant lexicographical advances, combined with more critical methodologies, have largely undermined that reading.³ A divine assembly setting has become widely accepted since the middle of the twentieth century,⁴ and more contemporary scholarship focuses on the psalm's possible distinction between YHWH and El,⁵ its literary form, and its historical contextualization.⁶

3 On the weakness of the traditional reading, see C. Gordon, "אלהים in its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *JBL* 54 (1935): 139–44; Cooke, "The Sons of [the] God(s)," 22–47; and Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," 123–37; cf. Anne E. Draffkorn, "Ilāni/Elohim," *JBL* 76.3 (1957): 216–24. The traditional reading has been defended by Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The History of Israelite Religion*, 4 vols. (Tel Aviv: Bialik and Dvir, 1937–56), 2.707–08, n. 90; and Y. M. Grintz, "Between Ugarit and Qumran (Deut 32:8–9, 43)," in *Studies in Early Biblical Ethnology and History* (Jerusalem: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchas, 1969), 253–54, n. 41; cf. J. Robert Vannoy, "The Use of the Word *hā'lohīm* in Exodus 21:6 and 22:7, 8," in J. H. Skilton, et al., eds., *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 225–41.

4 Other divine assembly texts in the Hebrew Bible are 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Jer 23:18, 22; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; Zech 3:1–5; Isa 6:1–13; 40:13–14; Amos 3:7, 13 (see David Bokovoy, "שמעו והעידו בבית יעקב," Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13," *JBL* 127.1 [2008]: 37–51); Dan 7:9–14. On the divine council type-scene, see David M. Fleming, "The Divine Council as Type Scene in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD Diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989); Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene," *JSOT* 31.3 (2007): 259–73. On the divine council in general, see H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *JTS* 45 (1944): 151–57; Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *JBL* 83.3 (1964): 279–86; E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); Robert P. Gordon, "Standing in the Council: When Prophets Encounter God," in Robert P. Gordon, ed., *The God of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 190–204.

5 The view that YHWH and El are distinguished in the psalm is promoted by Budde, "Ps. 82:6f," 41–42; Otto Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *JSS* 1.1 (1956): 29–30; Parker, "The Beginning of the Reign of God," 532–59; Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 48; Klaus Koch, "Ugaritic Polytheism and Hebrew Monotheism in Isaiah 40–55," in R. P. Gordon, ed., *The God of Israel* (Univ. of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 227; and Frankel, "El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6–8," 3–6. Against these, see Tzevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," 127–29; Heiser, "Are Yahweh and El Distinct Deities in Deut. 32:8–9 and Psalm 82?"; Peter Machinist, "How Gods Die, Biblically and Otherwise: A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring," in B. Pongratz-Leisten, ed., *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 195–203.

6 It is becoming more common for scholars to deny the possibility of ever situating the psalm within a historical framework (e.g., Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 122;

The enigmatic reference to Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34 has also been a subject of debate for the last fifty years,⁷ particularly among conservative Christian scholars who prioritize the univocality of scripture and thus utilize their reading of John 10 as an interpretive lens through which Psalm 82 may be filtered.⁸ Latter-day Saint treatments of the psalm have run the spectrum of interpretive possibilities since the days of Joseph Smith, but a traditional harmonizing hermeneutic related to that conservative Christian habit undergirds the majority of these approaches.

This paper will discuss these LDS approaches to Psalm 82, both devotional and academic, and interact with some recent publications that have examined the intersection of those approaches with critical scholarship. In contrast to the traditional LDS approach, I will not seek to harmonize Psalm 82 with John 10 but will highlight what I believe can be garnered from the texts by understanding John 10 precisely as a *reinterpretation* of Psalm 82. Several aspects of the early Christian hermeneutic will be illuminated along the way, which I hope will help us to better understand our own view of scripture and its relationship to our tradition.

Psalm 82:6 and the Church

References to Psalm 82 within the curricula and literature produced by the Church are limited to verse 6, which reads in the KJV, “I have

Machinist, “When Gods Die,” 236–37).

7 James A. Emerton, “The Interpretation of Ps lxxxii in John x,” *JTS* 11 (1960): 329–32; James S. Ackerman, “The Rabbinic Interpretation of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John,” *HTR* 59.2 (1966): 186–91; Anthony Hanson, “John’s Citation of Psalm LXXXII Reconsidered,” *NTS* 13 (1966): 363–67; Jerome H. Neyrey, “‘I Said: You Are Gods’: Psalm 82:6 and John 10,” *JBL* 108.4 (1989): 647–63; Mark D. Nispel, “Christian Deification and the Early Testimonia,” *VC* 53 (1999): 289–304; Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *JTS* 56 (2005): 30–74; Michael Heiser, “Jesus’s Quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34: A Different View of John’s Theological Strategy,” Paper presented at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, May 13, 2011, Spokane, WA (<http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/SBL%20Psalm%2082%20in%20John%2010%20paper.pdf>).

8 The use of the term *filtered* is not incidental. By using “scripture to interpret scripture,” conservative exegetes can hierarchize texts and use majority readings of certain texts to overrule theologically problematic readings of others.

said, ‘Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.’”⁹ This approach isolates v. 6 as a sort of proof-text for the Latter-day Saint notion that humanity shares a genetic link with divinity and primarily the concept that each human being is a child of God.¹⁰ These references are also almost exclusively mediated by quotations of John 10 and Jesus’s defense of his claim to divinity. For instance, in a 2012 BYU Campus Education Week talk entitled “Our Identity and Our Destiny,” Elder Tad R. Callister summarized the story in John 10 of Jesus’s confrontation with a group of accusatory Jews, quoting both John 10:34 and Psalm 82:6, and concluding, “The Savior was merely reaffirming a basic gospel teaching that all men are children of God, and thus all might become like Him.”¹¹ We see the same use of the psalm in the very first lesson of the *Nursery Manual*: “Tell the children that they have mothers and fathers on earth who love them. Tell them that they also have a Heavenly Father who knows and loves them. Open the Bible to Psalm 82:6 and read, ‘All of you are children of [God].’”¹²

The rest of Psalm 82 is quite condemnatory of these children of the Most High, however; so v. 6 operates independently in all instances. A look in the LDS Scripture Citation Index (<http://scriptures.byu.edu/>) shows only seven total references to Psalm 82, and most of them actually explicitly quote the text in John.¹³ A secondary traditional use of Psalm 82 has to do with defending the notion of a plurality of gods. This is more common among lay members of the Church in apologetic interactions with non-members, but there is an instance of Boyd K. Packer’s appealing in this manner to the psalm in a General Conference address.¹⁴ The Church’s use of the psalm thus avoids directly engaging many of the complexities of the psalm’s interpretation as a whole and instead decontextualizes the sixth verse and situates it within a Latter-day Saint soteriological framework.

9 אני־אמרתי אתם אלהים ובני עליין כלכם. Quotations from the Bible will be from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

10 Secondarily, the text is used in support of the theological principle of eternal progression.

11 Tad R. Callister, “Our Identity and Our Destiny,” *Brigham Young University 2012–2013 Speeches* (2013): 3–4 (<https://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=2060>).

12 *Behold Your Little Ones: Nursery Manual* (2008), 8 (<https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1984/10/the-pattern-of-our-parentage?lang=eng>).

13 The index lists twenty-one references to John 10:34–36.

14 Boyd K. Packer, “The Pattern of Our Parentage,” *Conference Report* (1984): 68 (<https://www.lds.org/manual/behold-your-little-ones-nursery-manual/lesson-1-i-am-a-child-of-god?lang=eng>).

Psalm 82 and the Academy

The more recent academic approaches to Psalm 82 are informed by almost a century of advances in biblical scholarship that have significantly altered that field's landscape. Many of these advances bear directly on our understanding of Psalm 82. The discoveries in the twentieth century of the Ugaritic texts,¹⁵ the Dead Sea Scrolls,¹⁶ and a number of other textual and material witnesses to early Israelite and Jewish belief and practice¹⁷ have compelled scholars to drastically qualify and sometimes even outright reject the concept of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸ Additionally, some scholars have argued that YHWH and El were separate deities in early Israelite belief, with El being the father of the second-tier deity YHWH.¹⁹ This hierarchy is reflected in the specific way divine council imagery is used in Psalm 82, according to these scholars.

15 Mark S. Smith, *Untold Stories: The Bible and Ugaritic Studies in the Twentieth Century* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2001); Mark S. Smith, "Recent Study of Israelite Religion in Light of the Ugaritic Texts," in K. Lawson Younger, ed., *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 1–23.

16 John J. Collins, "Powers in Heaven: God, Gods, and Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in J. J. Collins and R. A. Kugler, eds., *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 9–28.

17 For example, inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm contain praise and thanks directed to "YHWH and his *asherah*." See William G. Dever, *Did God Have A Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 197–208; Richard Hess, "Asherah or Asheratah?" *Or* 65 (1996): 209–19; Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 84–187; J. Emerton, "Yahweh and His Asherah: The Goddess or Her Symbol" *VT* 49.3 (1999): 315–37.

18 See, particularly, Peter Hayman, "Monotheism — A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42.1 (1991): 1–15 (https://rdtwot.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/hayman_monotheism-a-misused-word-in-jewish-studies_jjs_42-1.pdf); Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*; R. W. L. Moberly, "How Appropriate is 'Monotheism' as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?" in L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. E. Sproston North, eds., *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 216–34; Bob Becking, "The Boundaries of Israelite Monotheism," in A.-M. Korte and M. de Haardt, eds., *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations Into the Foundations of Western Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 9–27.

19 See note 4 above. I follow Machinist in acknowledging the likely distinction of the two deities in early Israelite thought but rejecting the likelihood that Psalm 82 consciously preserves that distinction. Rather, the author seems to employ an archaic judgment motif without concern for the implications of the literary conventions vis-à-vis YHWH's relationship to the head of the council. While

This notion is obviously attractive to a religious community that understands Elohim (Hebrew אֱלֹהִים) to be God the Father, and YHWH to be Elohim's son, the premortal Jesus. Psalm 82 is also widely recognized as one of the Hebrew Bible's clear witnesses to the divine council, which was a focus of Joseph Smith's cosmogony and soteriology.²⁰ Many academically minded Latter-day Saints have explored in great detail the points of contact between the critical academic perspective and the Latter-day Saint worldview, and some view the modern scholarly consensus as a vindication of Joseph Smith's teachings.²¹

Latter-day Saint Engagement with the Academy

Daniel Peterson's 2000 article on Psalm 82 is the most thorough analysis produced to date on the text by a Latter-day Saint. He evaluates several different readings of Psalm 82 and John 10, discussing the distinction of YHWH and El, the divine council, the deified dead in early Israelite religion, deification in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, the nature of worship, and a number of other issues related to the interpretation of our two texts. Ultimately, the interpretation he prefers hinges on the axiomatic idea that Christ's interpretation, whatever its exact nature, is the original and correct interpretation. He asks, "Is there any way of maintaining the interpretation of Psalm 82 that modern scholarship has largely and (I think) convincingly settled on, without

Machinist believes there is not enough data to situate the text historically, I have argued that the psalm's placement within the Psalms of Asaph indicates an exilic context for its primary compositional phase (Daniel O. McClellan, "Psalm 82 in the Psalms of Asaph," Paper presented at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 19, 2011, San Francisco, CA [<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/6259597/Psalm%2082%20in%20the%20Psalms%20of%20Asaph.pdf>]).

20 See, particularly, Kevin Barney, "Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1," *BYU Studies* 39.3 (2000): 107–24 (<https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/BYUStudies/article/viewFile/6692/6341>); David Bokovoy, "'Ye Really Are Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *FARMS Review* 19.1 (2007): 269–70; Bokovoy, "Joseph Smith and the Biblical Council of Gods," Paper presented at the 2010 FAIR Conference (<http://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2010-David-Bokovoy.pdf>).

21 For example, Bokovoy, "'Ye Really Are Gods,'" 267–68.

accusing the Savior of misuse of the passage? It seems to me that there may well be such a possibility.”²²

Peterson accomplishes this reconciliation of the “human” reading of John 10 with the “divine” reading of Psalm 82 via the premortal council in heaven from the third chapter of the Book of Abraham.²³ The scene there is strikingly similar to biblical occurrences of the divine council type-scene. From Peterson’s article: “We have God standing in the midst of premortal spirits who are appointed to be rulers, in a scene that is really a textbook instance of the motif of the divine assembly. These are premortal human beings. Can they truly be called ‘gods’ in any sense? ... Yes, they can.”²⁴ His harmonization, of course, departs significantly from the traditional Christian position in proposing that the division between the human and the divine was in both texts quite porous. From his conclusion: “only if the genus ‘gods’ and the genus ‘humans’ overlap can the Savior’s application of Psalm 82 to mortal human beings be a legitimate one.”

The most significant response to Peterson’s article comes from a paper entitled, “You’ve Seen One *Elohim*, You’ve Seen Them All? Mormonism’s Apologetic Use of Psalm 82,” presented by evangelical scholar Michael Heiser at the 2006 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). The paper was later published in a 2007 edition of *The FARMS Review*,²⁵ and Heiser traded thoughts with LDS scholar David Bokovoy on Mormonism’s use of Psalm 82. Heiser’s main criticisms of the academic Mormon position focused on (1) the distinction of YHWH and El, (2) the species-uniqueness of YHWH, and (3) Jesus’s use of Psalm 82:6. Regarding the first concern, Heiser is critical of the modern academic consensus regarding an archaic distinction between YHWH and El, arguing primarily that it rests upon a series of unwarranted

22 Daniel Peterson, “‘Ye are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in Stephen D. Ricks, et al., eds., *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo: FARMS, 2000) (<http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1091&index=17>).

23 Michael Heiser comments, “Mormonism rescues Jesus from being in error by appealing to material in the Book of Abraham that resolves the tension” (Heiser, “You’ve Seen One *Elohim*, You’ve Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism’s use of Psalm 82,” *FARMS Review* 19.1 [2007]: 262, n. 72).

24 Peterson, “‘Ye are Gods,’” 541–42.

25 Heiser, “You’ve Seen One *Elohim*, You’ve Seen Them All?” 221–66.

assumptions regarding the development of Israelite ideology.²⁶ Latter-day Saints, he insists, rely too heavily on the conclusions of Mark Smith, Simon Parker, and Margaret Barker regarding the original distinction between YHWH and El. Psalm 82 hardly serves as a vindication of that unique Latter-day Saint position.

Regarding the second concern: While Heiser promotes the need to acknowledge the Hebrew Bible's recognition of other gods, he also promotes understanding the word for "god," *elohim*, as a locative designation rather than an ontological one.²⁷ In other words, an *elohim* is just a being that inhabits the spiritual dimension as opposed to our temporal one. YHWH falls into this category but is of utterly unique ontology within it and is therefore to be distinguished from the other *elohim*. In Heiser's opinion, this challenges the LDS view of God and humanity's shared divine nature. Not only is YHWH of an entirely different species from humanity, he's an entirely different species from all other gods.

Lastly, Heiser understands John 10:34–36 to read Psalm 82 not as a reference to humans, but as a reference to gods. He only briefly addresses this in his *FARMS Review* articles, but he has provided a fuller discussion in a paper presented in 2011 at the Pacific Northwest regional meeting of the SBL.²⁸ There Heiser rejects the traditional understanding of John's use of Psalm 82 on three main grounds: (1) The defense of Jesus's divinity is too weak in light of John's consistent appeal to a high christology, (2) The violent reaction to Jesus's claim doesn't make sense with that reading, and (3) It is an eisegetic and inappropriate reading of Psalm 82.

26 Heiser asserts a series of eight propositions with which he points out most Latter-day Saints would agree and most Evangelicals would disagree, as well as a series of eight propositions with which most Evangelicals would agree and most Latter-day Saints would disagree. His criticisms of the Latter-day Saint position rest on the notion that the other gods of Israelite belief constitute the same "species" as YHWH. Heiser has argued for years that conservative Christians have nothing to fear from acknowledging the Hebrew Bible's unquestionable recognition of the existence and efficacy of other gods, but that YHWH is "species-unique" (Michael Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18.1 [2008]: 1–30; "Does Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible Demonstrate an Evolution from Polytheism to Monotheism in Israelite Religion?" *JESOT* 1.1 [2012]: 1–24).

27 "Ēlōhîm is a 'plane of reality' term — it denotes a being's primary or proper (but not necessarily exclusive) 'place of residence'" (Heiser, "You've Seen One *Elohim*, You've Seen Them All?" 242, n. 39). Heiser has a book forthcoming on the topic of the nature of deity in the Hebrew Bible entitled *Unseen Realm*.

28 Heiser, "Jesus's Quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34." See note 6.

For Heiser, Jesus understands the verse to refer to the very members of the divine council understood by modern scholars to be in view. We will return to these concerns following a review of David Bokovoy's rejoinder to Heiser.

Bokovoy is selective in his response to Heiser's essay, but he broadly supports the conclusions of Simon Parker, Mark Smith, and Margaret Barker. These are not critical to Peterson's case for the conceptual link between Psalm 82's divine council and Mormonism's notion of a premortal council in heaven, though, which is the fulcrum on which his case pivots. The thematic points of contact between council scenes in ancient Near Eastern literature like *Enuma Elish* and the books of Moses and Abraham provide a compelling defense for the imposition of interpretive lenses drawn from the Latter-day Saint canon on their reading of Psalm 82.

Bokovoy also suggests that Heiser misses the mark a bit in highlighting areas of disagreement between LDS ideology and the academic perspective on the ancient Israelite conceptualization of YHWH and his relationship to the divine council. In the LDS worldview, our modern dispensation represents a far fuller revelation of eternal truths than available to ancient Israelites. In other words, disagreement is to be expected. Peterson's claim is not that Psalm 82 reflects modern Mormon ideology inerrantly or *in toto*, but rather that the perspective of critical scholars on the divine council can be comfortably situated within Mormonism's broad and nonsystematic worldview.

The central portions of Bokovoy's response defend Peterson's arguments by critically examining the nature and function of the divine council and humanity's relationship to it, appealing to wider academic consensus over and against Heiser's own criticisms. Drawing upon texts and traditions from all over the ancient Near East, Bokovoy emphasizes the blurred and porous boundaries that separate humanity from the gods in the biblical and cognate literature. This theomorphic view of humanity extends down to the appeal to Psalm 82 found in John 10, which undercuts Heiser's insistence that Jesus appeals to the psalm as a reference to gods and not to humans.²⁹

29 Heiser's response largely reiterates arguments made previously (Michael Heiser, "Israel's Divine Council, Mormonism, and Evangelicalism: Clarifying the Issues and Directions for Future Study," *FARMS Review* 19.1 [2007]: 315–23.). He dedicates the bulk of the response to responding to issues with the distinction of YHWH and El and YHWH as species-unique.

A Non-Harmonizing Perspective

A concern ostensibly undergirding the arguments of Peterson and Heiser is the harmonizing of Jesus's interpretation of Psalm 82 with the modern academic position on the Psalm. Bokovoy's paper hints at the possibility of other interpretations of Jesus's appeal, but he is defending Peterson's remarks and so focuses primarily on the strengths of that position. My concern in this section is to examine Psalm 82 and John 10 without a view to harmonizing them. I will look first at Psalm 82 itself and then use Second Temple Jewish religious developments to move toward John 10. I will respond to Peterson, Bokovoy, and Heiser, and then discuss what we can learn from seeing Jesus's reading as a reinterpretation.

Psalm 82

To begin, I do not think Psalm 82 distinguishes YHWH from Elyon. The evidence is firmly in favor of seeing these deities as separate within the Israelite pantheon until around the beginning of the monarchy,³⁰ but it is very unlikely that Psalm 82 is that old, and there only appears to be one active deity within the psalm. If one insists on their separation in this psalm, they compound its interpretive difficulties, as Machinist discusses in his essay.³¹ While it is plausible the psalm appropriates an older divine council motif in which YHWH operates as a subordinate, in its current state there is little reason to try to understand more than one authoritative deity as being in view. As will be discussed below, the lateness of the composition also mitigates that reading.

Next, divine council imagery does not seem to be the central literary feature of the psalm. It is the setting, but the rhetorical point of the psalm is communicated through a unique style of lament. Elsewhere in the Psalms of Asaph we find the psalmist engaging in what has been called a "God-lament," where he bemoans his situation and asks God how long he will allow the situation to continue.³² He then issues a series of imperatives and jussives that will correct the state of affairs and concludes with some manner of petition.

30 Unfortunately, space does not permit a full response to Heiser's concerns with this conclusion. See note 4 above and bibliographical information available in those sources for more.

31 Machinist, "When Gods Die," 195–203.

32 See Craig Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 37–40.

Two of the clearest examples of this type of lament are other Psalms of Asaph, namely Psalms 74 and 79, which are reacting to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple at the hands of the Babylonians.³³ Both psalms ask “how long” injustice is to reign and then issue a series of imperatives, jussives, and negative jussives in an effort to compel God to act. This style is particularly emphatic in Psalm 74:

(1) O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? (2) Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell . . . (10) How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? (11) Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom? . . . (18) Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and an impious people reviles your name. (19) Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor forever. (20) Have regard for your covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. (21) Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. (22) Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long. (23) Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.

After defending the poor and the needy, Psalm 74:22 calls upon God to rise up and plead his cause. The concern in these laments is generally for the maintenance of justice and order. God is presented as withholding or somehow delaying that justice, and the psalmist begs for deliverance against the enemy.

These elements are also found in Psalm 82, although in a slightly altered form. It is YHWH who asks the gods of the nations, “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” The series of imperatives show the same concern for justice and order: “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” The group identified here and in Psalm 74 as the poor, the needy, and the orphans are just synecdoche for any victims of social injustice, which was a very common convention in the ancient Near

33 See, particularly, Ps 74:4–7.

East.³⁴ The complaint is not that these groups specifically are being victimized, but that justice as a whole is being neglected. The result in Psalm 82 of this negligence is that the masses walk around in darkness without knowledge or understanding, and the foundations of the earth are shaken (v. 5).

The climactic petition in Psalm 82 cannot be addressed by the complainant to the gods of the nations, so the psalmist himself petitions for God to rise up and correct the injustices committed by those gods. He does this by vacating their stewardships over the several nations of the earth and appropriating them for himself. According to this reading, Psalm 82 is a “*gods-lament*” put into the mouth of YHWH on behalf of the suffering Israelites. In Psalm 74:21–22 the psalmist asks YHWH to protect the poor and needy, and to rise up to plead his case. In Psalm 82 YHWH rises up (נָצַח, “to stand”) to plead his case in the divine council (v. 1), calling upon the gods to protect the poor and the needy. Psalm 82 thus functions as a response to, and fulfillment of, Psalm 74. Psalm 82 indicts the gods for their failure to maintain the proper order and calls upon YHWH to take direct control of the governance of those nations. In Psalm 79 the nations do not know YHWH and they invade his inheritance (an allusion to Deut 32:8–9 where YHWH receives Israel as his inheritance). Psalm 82 renegotiates that inheritance: YHWH will take over direct rule of the nations. The concluding verse of the Psalms of Asaph, Ps 83:18, declares the new state of affairs: “Let them [the nations] know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.”

34 They are stock characters that represent ideal victims associated with conventional conceptions of social justice. See Morris Silver, “Prophets and Markets Revisited,” in K. D. Irani and Morris Silver, eds., *Social Justice in the Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 182–83 (italics in original): “The Ancient Near East designated victims by terms more or less conventionally translated as ‘orphan,’ ‘widow,’ ‘poor person,’ and ‘peasant.’ The referents are much less real-world social groupings than intellectual constructs. That is, the terms refer to the *ideal victim*.” An excellent example of the rhetorical use of these groups is the epilogue to Hammurabi’s laws, which asserts that the laws were erected “in order that the mighty not wrong the weak, to provide just ways for the waif and the widow” (“The Laws of Hammurabi,” translated by Martha Roth [COS 2.131: 336, 351]). Of course, there is not a single law in his collection that actually provides for the widow or the orphan. Their provision arises out of the general cosmic order, which is maintained by Hammurabi’s righteous administration.

Second Temple Jewish Perspectives on the Gods

This would date the psalm to the late exilic period, well after the destruction of the temple. While this puts the psalm chronologically closer to John's own composition than most LDS scholars have in the past, there are still significant ideological barriers that separate John's reading from the original purpose of the psalm. Most importantly, the Second Temple Jewish view of the gods changed quite significantly between the late exilic period and the end of the first century CE. The combination of Hellenization and the explosion of Jewish literary compositions during the time period catalyzed a great deal of theological development. The gods of the nations appear to have become conflated with angels in order to confine them to an inferior and contingent taxonomy. The earliest clear evidence of this conflation comes from the Septuagint, and later from other apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, and at Qumran.³⁵ In all these corpora, texts originally referring to gods are translated, quoted, or alluded to in explicit reference to angels.

This seemed to solve the problem of the gods throughout the Hellenistic period, but around the turn of the era we find concern with that interpretation. This is most clear in commentary on Genesis 6:2, 4, where the sons of God inappropriately sire children with human women. Obviously the ability to bear children with humans attests to a view of genetic compatibility, but in the Greco-Roman period, some authors object to that compatibility.³⁶ There were different attempts to consolidate the text with that objection. Philo insisted that in emergency

35 For example, the Hebrew phrase בני אֱלֹהִים, “sons of God,” in Deut 32:8 is rendered in all but the earliest Septuagint manuscripts with the Greek ἄγγελοι τοῦ Θεοῦ, “angels of God.” See Andy Reimer, “Rescuing the Fallen Angels: The Case of the Disappearing Angels at Qumran,” *DSD* 7.3 (2000): 335–40; Darrell D. Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity,” in F. V. Reiterer, et al., eds., *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings — Origins, Development and Reception* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 413–35; Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 196–97; Daniel O. McClellan, “What Is Deity in LXX Deuteronomy?” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 22, 2010, Atlanta, GA. This process begins well before the Hellenistic Period, however. On de-deification in the Hebrew tradition of Deuteronomy, see Judith Hadley, “The De-deification of Deities in Deuteronomy,” in R. P. Gordon, ed., *The God of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157–74.

36 Philip S. Alexander, “The Targumim and Early Exegesis of ‘Sons of God’ in Genesis 6,” *JSS* 23.1 (1972): 60–71.

situations, spirits can transform into a human form that is genetically compatible.³⁷ Some rabbinic authors argued the transformation was not to human form, but to flaming fire that did not burn the women.³⁸ *The Testament of Reuben* insists angels simply appeared during intercourse between human women and their husbands, which resulted in the birth of heroic men.³⁹

While this compatibility was a concern for some, early authors also raised concerns with the idea that angels could sin and rebel against God. Philo expresses this concern, stating it was Moses's custom to refer to demons in terms properly reserved for angels.⁴⁰ Trypho, in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, explicitly states that it is blasphemous to suggest angels could rebel against God.⁴¹ They had no autonomy to do so. Shortly after, Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai not only translates "sons of God" as "sons of nobles," but curses all who render "sons of God." This reading is also found in the Targumim, in St. Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, and even in Augustine, whose position is similar to that of Trypho. In time, an understanding of the sons of God as humans would dominate the theological landscape.

John 10:34–36

While the notion of genetic compatibility was unlikely to have played a role in the interpretation of Psalm 82:6, opposition to the notion that angels could sin certainly would have influenced its interpretation. Without agency of their own, the angels could hardly be put on trial for neglecting their duties. So to whom did the author of John 10 think the psalm referred? The oblique reference in John 10:34 to "those to whom the word of God came" suggests that whatever the author's interpretation, it was common enough not to require any real specification. The reader is assumed to know. The most common interpretation of the psalm we can detect from anywhere near the time period is its rabbinic interpretation as a reference to the Israelites at Sinai.⁴² According to this reading, upon reception of the law via Moses, the Israelites were freed from the power of the Angel of Death, effectively rendering them immortal. Upon

37 Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.92.

38 *Pirqe d. R. Eliezer* 22.

39 *Test. Reuben* 5:6.

40 Philo, *On Giants* 4.

41 Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 1.79.1.

42 See note 7 above. The relevant rabbinic texts are *Tanḥ. B.* 9; *ʿAbod. Zar.* 5a; *Midr. Rab. Exod* 32:7.

sinning with the golden calf, however, they were again condemned to mortality. The available evidence supports the conclusion that the author of John 10 understood Psalm 82 to refer to the Israelites at Sinai. His interpretation is a theological innovation of the Greco-Roman period that is quite distinct from the psalm's original context.

This is not to say, however, that Jesus's appeal to Psalm 82 had nothing to do with divine nature. According to this reading, the reception of the Word of God, manifested through the Law of Moses, rendered the Israelites immortal. This moved them from the realm of humanity to the realm of divinity. John's own gospel has a similar view of the reception of the word of God. John 1:12 states that Jesus gave all who receive him — the word made flesh — power to become the "sons of God." There is some overlap of natures in view here, and this is not unique to John 10. Later interpreters understood the psalm in much the same way. Origen's soteriology included a brand of divinization, and he understood the word "gods" to refer alternatively to angels and humans, since the latter could be raised to the level of the former.⁴³ Mark Nisipel and Carl Mosser are two scholars who have recently argued along disparate lines that Psalm 82, especially as presented in John, shaped the early Christian notion of *theopoiesis*, or divinization.⁴⁴ While this Patristic view of divinization is obviously not exactly the same as that accepted by Latter-day Saints, it attests to the belief that humanity does have within it the capacity to attain to godhood in some sense. As Bokovoy and Peterson have each shown, this belief was common to Israel, to Second Temple Judaism, and to early Christianity. This reading situates John 10 much more comfortably into the theological consciousness of first-century Judaism as well as the author's own broader soteriology.

Responding to Objections

As noted above, Michael Heiser objects to the "Sinai" reading of John 10.⁴⁵ His third objection — that the Sinai reading is eisegetic — has little to commend it. That it is eisegetic hardly means that John did not understand it that way. It is a theologically motivated presupposition to insist that the author of John could not possibly have appealed to

43 Origen, *Commentary on Exodus*.

44 Nisipel, "Christian Deification and the Early Testimonia"; Mosser, "The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification"; Paul M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 32–35.

45 Heiser, "Jesus's Quotation of Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34," 7–8.

eisegesis. His second reason — that the Jews' response is inordinate — is also problematic. The Jews are not necessarily just responding to his exegesis of Psalm 82:6. Jesus did, after all, reassert in vv. 36–38 he was claiming to be the Son of God and to be united with him (the claim that irked them in the first place). Heiser's first reason — that such a reading of Psalm 82 is a weak or evasive defense of Jesus's divinity — merits a few comments. One of the primary exegetical problems of John 10:34–36 is precisely how Jesus's response functions as a defense of his claims to divinity.

First, I disagree that the response is weak, and I base this on two details Jesus includes in his response. He takes the time to identify the divine beings as those to whom the word of God came. He then takes the time to identify himself as the one sanctified by God and sent into the world. The implication of Jesus's argument is that if the Israelites are made divine by the reception of God's word, how much more divine is that word itself, anointed, made flesh, and sent into the world. Jesus's identification as the Word of God, the Messiah, and the Son of God are by far the most important to John. It is hardly a weak rhetorical point.

Heiser understands Jesus to be asserting his very ontological identification as God, but this is a Trinitarian reading that I do not find in the text. Throughout John Jesus never identifies himself as God. He identifies himself as the Son of God, and the Jews understand that father/son relationship to imply equality with God. This is not to indicate ontological identification with him, but equality. It should be kept in mind that the epithet "Son of God" had quite a rich literary heritage in the Greco-Roman period of which the gospel authors would have been aware and by which they have been convincingly shown to have been influenced.⁴⁶ In none of those other contexts is the "Son of God" understood to be ontologically identified with God.

We need not understand the accusation of v. 33 to be that Jesus is claiming to be God himself, but just that he is a human claiming to be

46 Jarl Fossum, "Son of God," in D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 128–37; J. K. Hoffmeier, "Son of God: From Pharaoh to Israel's Kings to Jesus," *BibRev* 13.3 (1997): 44–49; Jarl Fossum, "Son of God," in K. van der Toorn, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd Revised Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 788–94; Adela Yarbro Collins, "Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Jews," *HTR* 92.4 (1999): 393–408; John J. Collins, "The Background of the 'Son of God' Text," *BBR* 7 (1997): 51–61; Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 48–74.

divine. His response is that other humans have been made divine by the reception of the Word. How much more divine is the son of God — that very Word himself? The Jews get upset when Jesus says he and the Father are one, but what did he mean by “one”? John uses the language of oneness elsewhere to refer to a unity of glory. In John 17:22 Christ states that the glory that God gave to Christ has been given to his disciples, that they may be one just as God and Jesus are one. In John 10:38 Jesus exhorts the Jews to believe that the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. He does not seem to mean they are one being, though. In John 17:21 Jesus prays, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.” As the Son of God, Christ is unified with God in glory. He shares in God’s glory, and this is unacceptable to the Jews. *This* understanding does relate to the extra-biblical literary background of the “Son of God” epithet.

Jesus’s Message

So this brings us to the final question. If we understand John’s description to be a verbatim account, is Jesus misusing scripture by reinterpreting Psalm 82? I suggest he is not. I believe Jesus is doing what all scripture-based religious communities do, namely reading scripture in a way that makes it applicable to their time. He likens the scriptures to his own day, to paraphrase 1 Nephi 19:23. In John 10, the reference to Psalm 82 refers to foundational narratives in the Jewish community’s shared identity, namely the Exodus and Sinai traditions. Peterson and Bokovoy do the same thing in proposing that Psalm 82 can be ideologically linked with Abraham 3’s council in heaven. This is a Latter-day Saint foundational narrative. When we can tie texts like these to our own communal narrative, we strengthen our community’s identification with sacral past and utilize that past to inform our present experience.⁴⁷ This makes the scriptures a dynamic tool, not just a frozen text.

On a literary level, Jesus’s defense here has a wider rhetorical purpose, as well. Not only does he identify himself as one of the Jews by appealing to a shared understanding of the Psalm’s meaning, but by appealing to that tradition, whereby those who received the word were made divine, the author reminds the reader/listener of a promise made a few verses earlier (John 10:28): “I give to them eternal life, and they shall never

47 Alan Kirk, “Social and Cultural Memory,” in A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 21–22; cf. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. press, 1989), 46.

perish.” John 1:12 is no doubt also in view here: “as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.” John’s message is this: The Israelites were briefly made immortal and thus divine by the reception of God’s Word. The Word is now incarnate among you, and he is inviting you to receive him. John 10:34–36 and Jesus’s appeal to Psalm 82 is not just about Jesus’s divinity, it is also about the divinity of those who hear and believe.

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