

# Understanding Israelite Monotheism

Old Testament affirmations such as [Deut 6:4](#) (“Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God is one”) and the prophets’ repeated statements that “there is none besides Yahweh,” can easily lead to the assumption that the OT Israelites did not believe in the existence of other gods. According to this assumption, the definition of monotheism rules out the existence of other gods. In light of many OT passages, these assumptions cannot be sustained. Rather than producing contradictions within the biblical text, these passages that are often set aside demonstrate how godly Israelites thought about Yahweh and provide a more accurate picture of Israelite monotheism.

## The Gods of the Old Testament

The writers of the OT primarily use two plural nouns for a plurality of gods: *elohim* and *elim*. Here is a sampling of the many passages in which these terms occur.

<i>elohim</i>	<i>elim</i>
<a href="#">Deut 32:17</a> ; <a href="#">Pss 82:1</a> ; <a href="#">86:8</a> ; <a href="#">95:3</a> ; <a href="#">96:4</a> ; <a href="#">97:7</a> , <a href="#">9</a> ; <a href="#">136.2</a> ; <a href="#">138:1</a>	<a href="#">Exod 15:11</a> ; <a href="#">Psa 89:5–7</a> [Heb: vv. 6–8]; <a href="#">Psa 29:1</a>

[Deuteronomy 32:17](#) describes the gods (*elohim*) worshiping in disobedience as “demons” (*shedim*, low-ranking divine beings known in other ancient Near Eastern texts). They are not merely idols of wood and stone. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the writer describes these “other gods” (*acherim elohim*) as the heavenly host ([Deut 17:3](#)). And the same heavenly host terminology also is used in references to actual spirit beings assembled in Yahweh’s presence ([1 Kgs 22:19–23](#)). [Deuteronomy 4:19–20](#) and its explicit parallel, [Deut 32:8–9](#), together demonstrate that the heavenly host terminology designates more than celestial objects:

Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day ([Deut 4:19–20](#)).

These celestial objects are the gods of [Deut 17:3](#) and [32:17](#). In [Deut 32:8–9](#), the writer of Deuteronomy calls them “sons of God.”

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. But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage ([Deut 32:8–9](#)).

[Deuteronomy 32:8](#) describes Yahweh's dispersal of the nations at Babel and his resultant *disinheriting* of those nations, giving them over to other, lesser gods (*elohim*). [Psalm 82](#), in turn, describes Yahweh's end-times punishment of these gods for their corrupt rule of the nations. These passages are central to the OT's explanation for the existence of other nations' pantheons.

The starry host description of [Deut 4:19–20](#) also occurs in [Job 38:7](#), which refers to the presence of the "sons of God" at the creation of the foundations of the earth. "Sons of God" is a common designation for divine beings (compare [Job 1:6](#); [2:1](#)), and in [Psa 82:6](#), the psalmist explicitly refers to the "sons of the Most High" as gods (*elohim*, compare [Pss 82:1](#); [89:5–7](#)).

A. The Hebrew text of the OT uses the term *elohim* to refer to five different entities—even though this distinction is rarely clear in English translations:

B. Yahweh, the God of Israel (more than 2,000 times)

C. The gods of Yahweh's heavenly council, both loyal and disloyal ([Pss 82](#); [89](#); compare [Deut 32:8–9](#), [43](#); [Psa 58:11](#))

D. The gods of foreign nations (e.g., [1 Kgs 11:33](#))

E. Demons ([Deut 32:17](#))

F. Spirits of dead people ([1 Sam 28:13](#))

G. Angels (see [note](#) on [Gen 35:7](#))

If the biblical writers could use *elohim* to refer to entities besides the God of Israel, then they did not equate the term "god" with only one entity. The biblical writers knew there was more than one *elohim* because they did not reserve the term only for the God of Israel: The faith of the biblical writers allowed for the existence of other gods (*elohim*). This also means that the modern term "monotheism" does not accurately capture the beliefs of the biblical writers. This disconnect is caused by the desire of modern readers to reserve the word *god* for one being, whereas the biblical writers did not necessarily share this desire.

### **"Denial Statements" in the Old Testament**

[Deuteronomy 4](#) and [32](#) ([Deut 4:19–20](#); [32:8–9](#), [17](#)), which play a central role in OT theology, affirm both the existence of other gods (*elohim*) and their antagonism toward the God of Israel. And yet both of these chapters use the sort of language that is often presumed to deny the existence of other gods:

You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD, he is *the God*; *besides him there is no other* ([Deut 4:35](#)).

Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that YHWH, he is *the God* in heaven above and on the earth beneath; *there is no other* ([Deut 4:39](#)).

See now that I, even I, am he, and *there is no god beside me*; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand ([Deut 32:39](#)).

These Hebrew “denial phrases” and a handful of similar ones scattered throughout the OT, rather than assert the nonexistence of other gods, contend that no other gods compare to Yahweh (compare [Exod 15:11](#)). The OT asserts the absolute and utterly incomparable uniqueness of Yahweh. No other god can claim to be uncreated or have His attributes.

To illustrate, these same type of “denial statements” occur in reference to Babylon and Moab in [Isa 47:8, 10](#), and to Nineveh in [Zeph 2:15](#). In [Isa 47:8, 10](#), Babylon says to herself, “I am, and there is none else beside me.” Babylon certainly does not claim to be the only country in the world. Rather, Babylon asserts that she has no rival. Nineveh makes the identical claim in [Zeph 2:15](#), even though there are other cities.

### **Israelite Monotheism**

All the entities the Hebrew Bible called *elohim* have one thing in common: they all inhabit the nonhuman (heavenly) realm. The term *elohim*, then, is about a “place of residence”—it identifies the proper domain of the entity it describes. Yahweh, the lesser gods, angels, demons, and the disembodied (spiritual) dead people—all of these are rightful inhabitants of the disembodied, spiritual world. While they may be able to cross over to the world of people, as Scripture tells us, and while certain humans may be transported to their realm (e.g., prophets; Enoch), their proper domain and our proper domain are separate.

The spiritual world also contains differentiation of rank and power. Consequently, Yahweh is an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* is Yahweh. There is only one Yahweh. He is not one among equals; He is “species unique.” *That* was what orthodox Israelites believed about Yahweh, and that is the meaning of biblical monotheism.

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