

**Future Congress 2: Handout<sup>1</sup>**  
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**The Post-Christian Future, Part 1: Thinking Theologically About the Utopian Impulse as a Perversion of the Judeo-Christian Worldview (Jan 6, 2013)**

**Handout:** The divine council / supernatural worldview of biblical theology as it relates to earthly human order.

**Point:** The utopian life the human heart longs for cannot be obtained without divine supervision and maintenance, and obedience to Yahweh by all out of a changed heart—not mere outward conformity. This describes the *global* Edenic state (Eden was originally not described as global—it had geography), which can only be brought about by Yahweh himself. Achieving this requires the willful acts of Yahweh in preserving a believing remnant—those who exercise “the obedience of faith” (i.e., embracing the work of Jesus Christ on the cross—the gospel), changing their hearts through the Spirit, and returning to earth to cleanse and restore Eden Himself.

**Content:** Time constraints prompt me to excerpt the source below (with a few notes inserted at MSH), as it succinctly captures the flow of biblical-theological thought with respect to this topic.

Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol", in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 422-444.<sup>2</sup>

“The fact that the mythopoetic<sup>3</sup> view of reality as the realm in which everything happens through the drama and conflict among the gods has been broken in Israel has led to a denigration of this imagery even though it continues to play a part long past the period of the Old Testament. But the conception of the divine council belongs to the move that takes place in Israel in which there is a radical centralization or integration of divine power in one deity, Yahweh. The cosmic forces are seen as unified in Yahweh and not divided. The notion of the divine council keeps more sharply in mind and underscores the fact that we do not have simplicity without complexity in the divine world and the governance of the cosmos. The demonstration of that fact and its cosmological significance is the task that remains in the rest of this essay. It will be done by a series of claims about the place of the divine council and the justification of those claims.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Handout also available at <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/FC2DChandout.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [Dr. Patrick D. Miller](#) was for many years a professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He recently retired. He is a favorite scholar of mine.

<sup>3</sup> In scholarly discussion, “myth” and “mythopoetic” refer to any epic story that has divine beings as characters. It is not a statement of denial of the supernatural, though many academics would make such a denial in terms of their worldview.

<sup>4</sup>Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol", 426.

The claims:

**1. *The machinery for the divine governance of the sociopolitical structures of society centers in Yahweh's rule over and through the divine council.***<sup>5</sup>

- Genesis 1-3 (Eden, rebellion & Edenic collapse)
- Genesis 11 (Babel disinheritance)
- Genesis 12-18 (call and protection of Abraham; birth of Isaac)
- Exodus 12-14, 23 (divine warrior, guidance)
- Joshua 5, 10:10-12; Hab 3 (divine warrior in conquest)
- Judges 5, 6, 13 (armies of heaven, divine appointments)
- Prophets (Amos 3:7; Jer 23:18-23)
- Monarchy (2 Sam. 5:22–29; 1 Kings 22:19-23; 2 Kgs 6:15–19; 7:6)
- Redemption of Israel; messianic hope ([MSH: Isa 9:6 LXX]; Isa 40:1-11 – *plural imperatives*; Isa 40:26; 45:12)

**2. *The divine council was present at the creation (Job 38:6) and involved indirectly in that process. As above, the focus is more cosmological (order) than cosmogonic (origin).***<sup>6</sup>

“The clearest portrayal of a cosmogonic order in the Old Testament is the account of the creation in the Priestly stratum (Gen. 1:1–2:4a). The repeated, step-by-step stages of God’s creation of the universe reach their climax in the creation of *’ādām*, the human creature. That act, however, arises out of a decree to the divine assembly: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness’ (Gen. 1:26). While other interpretations are possible, the most plausible understanding of these first person plural verbs and suffixes is that God’s words are a directive to the divine council. At the point in the text where the narrative speaks of a close relation between the divine world and the human world and suggests that the human partakes of the divine in some fashion, it refers not simply to the deity but to the whole divine world, the divine beings. The human is both a consequence of Yahweh’s decision in and to the council and a reflection of the divine world as it is embodied in the heavenly assembly. The *ben ’ādām* is like the *ben ’ēlīm*, a notion expressed explicitly also in Psalm 8.”<sup>7</sup>

“[Genesis 3] clearly has in mind the most fundamental relation and distinction in the created order, that between the human world and the divine world. The expression ‘one of us’ refers to the divine ones who make up the council of Yahweh and comes into the text as an implicit conversation within the council at the point where a possible breach in the relationship is present, where a human appropriation of the divine world is potential and the divine world must say no.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid..

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 433.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 434.

The verse must be seen against 3:5, which also refers to the divine worlds, the gods: ‘And you will be like gods (*kēlōhîm*), knowing (*yōd‘ê*) good and evil.’”<sup>8</sup>

“The second place where we see the divine council involved in the creative activity is specifically Deuteronomic and has to do with the order of nations and peoples. In Deuteronomy 32 the origin of Israel is set in the following context:

Remember the days of old,  
consider the years long past;  
ask your father and he will inform you;  
your elders and they will tell you.  
When Elyon apportioned the nations,  
when he divided humankind,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of the gods (*b<sup>e</sup>nê ʾlōhîm*);  
the Lord’s own portion was his people,  
Jacob his allotted share.

“Embedded in this long poem is the tradition of Yahweh (here in the form of Elyon) apportioning the nations among the divine ones who make up the heavenly assembly. The order of nations is rooted in the order of heaven. Yahweh’s decree determines that order, but it is fixed according to the number of the members of the assembly. The term *b<sup>e</sup>nê ʾlōhîm* is one of the standard designations for the members of the divine world over which Yahweh rules. In this case they are seen as the gods of the nations, the peoples being determined according to their number and placed under their rule.”<sup>9</sup>

“The judgment upon the human creature in the Yahwistic story arises out of the realization that the human creature brings about a kind of disorder in the universe in breaking through the boundary distinction between the divine world and the human world. That is confirmed in the other place where Yahweh addresses the divine council (Gen. 11:6–7):

This is only the beginning of what they will do. Now therefore (*w<sup>e</sup>‘attah*) nothing which they decide to do shall be out of their reach. Come let us go down and there confuse their language.

“As in Gen. 3:22, the building of the tower at Babel is a sin against God as an effort to move into the divine world, the divine domain. The threatened loss of creature limits (3:22a and 11:6–7) leads in both instances (*w<sup>e</sup>‘attāh*) to the judging activity of God. In its judgment speech, Genesis 11, like 3:22, reflects a decree within the assembly to create human disorder for the sake of cosmic order, the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 435.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 436.

confusion among humankind to inhibit the breakdown of the orderly relationship between divine and human worlds.”<sup>10</sup>

**3. Related to both of the preceding claims is the fact that *the maintenance of justice and righteousness is the foundation of the universe, the responsibility of the divine council, and the issue upon which hang both the stability of the universe and the stability and effective reality of the divine world.***<sup>11</sup>

“H.H. Schmid has made an effective case for the view that the notion of ‘righteousness’ (*ṣedeq/ṣ̣ēdāqāh*) in the Old Testament is fundamentally an all-encompassing world order. Starting from an examination of *ma‘at* in Egyptian thought and looking at the close connection between the cosmic and the ethical-social order that is a common feature of ancient Near Eastern thought, Schmid contends that ‘“righteousness” is not understood narrowly as a legal matter, but as universal world order, as comprehensive salvation’. It is his judgment that ‘ancient Near Eastern political, and social order find their unity under the concept of “creation”.’

“Such an understanding of the close association between the Old Testament concepts of righteousness and justice and the maintenance of the world order that is set forth in the creation and demonstrated in nature and history is taken up by Douglas Knight in his treatment of cosmogony and ethics. He summarizes this understanding as follows:

YHWH created the world according to *ṣ̣ēdāqâ*, ‘righteousness’, a principle of moral and cosmic orderliness similar to the Egyptian *ma‘at*. When *ṣ̣ēdāqâ* prevails, the world is at harmony, in a state of well-being, in *šālôm*. An act of sin in the religious sphere or injustice in the social sphere can inject discord and shatter *šālôm*. It then takes a decisive act of *mišpāt*, ‘justice’, to restore the *šālôm* and reestablish the *ṣ̣ēdāqâ*. This *mišpāt* is not, as in our judicial system, an impartial judging between the violator and the injured party. Rather, it is an act of partiality which is not concerned simply to punish the guilty but to restore the victim to full participation in the community. Only when all deserving persons enjoy the fullness of life in community can *ṣ̣ēdāqâ* reign. World order is thus not a static concept, an essence which exists impervious to all else. It is predicated directly on full moral behavior in the social world, and YHWH is perceived to be its protector par excellence.

“It is against this background that one must look at one of the texts in which the council of Yahweh is most explicitly present, Psalm 82. It takes place entirely in the world of the gods, although what is clear from the story is that that world is totally ruled and controlled by the Lord. The psalm depicts a meeting of the ‘divine council’ (v. 1) in which God rises and pronounces judgment on the gods. The reason for the verdict against them is spelled out in detail and unambiguous.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 435.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 437.

The divine ones, the gods who are supposed to provide for order/righteousness among the peoples of the earth, have utterly failed to do so. They have shown partiality to the wicked and failed to maintain the right of the poor and the weak. The consequence of this is stated to be a shaking of the foundations of the world. The failure to maintain order, which in this instance is clearly seen to be the maintenance of righteousness in the moral sphere, the resistance to a disorder that does in the poor and gives the rich and the wicked control, is seen to be manifest in a kind of cosmic disorder. The cosmos comes apart when righteousness is not maintained. Yahweh as guarantor of the world's order is also guarantor of the spheres of righteousness and justice. Indeed these are one and the same thing. The equation can be reversed and say the same thing.”<sup>12</sup>

**MSH:** In other words, righteousness is something that the divine world (even the lesser *elohim* assigned to the other nations / to whom the nations were assigned [Deut 32:8-9 with LXX/DSS and Deut 4:19-20) are expected by Yahweh to govern as He would – as His imagers are supposed to, in accord with his notion of justice. Humans cannot accomplish this without divine supervision and maintenance. When the gods fail and otherwise pervert the Deuteronomy 32 worldview that results from Yahweh's punitive act, chaos ensues and must be dealt with (and can only be dealt with) by Yahweh's power.

**4. If the maintenance of world order as the manifestation of righteousness is a responsibility of the divine assembly, it is not surprising that *at the key point where the issue of the justice of God and the problem of undeserved suffering comes to the fore, the divine council is the setting or the occasion for the raising of the issue.***<sup>13</sup>

“That is seen of course in the prologue to the book of Job. There we encounter a formal gathering of the gods or the divine ones, who present themselves at what seems to be a set time (1:6 and 2:1). There ensues a conversation between the Lord and Satan who has been a kind of ‘roving investigator’ and is here to report and receive orders as the other members of the council. In these two scenes, we see ‘two heavenly councils in which Job's fate is at stake’. The meeting of the council, the conversation between the Lord and Satan, and the consequent activity of Satan at the direction, or better, permission of the Lord provide the setting for the dialogues in which the justification of God's ways as occasioned by the experience of meaningless suffering is the central issue. Once again the fundamental matters of righteousness and world order originate in or out of the divine council. The issue of suffering is seen not to be a matter that has its primary ground anthropologically. It is raised *in the divine world* precisely where responsibility for order is lodged and thus righteousness is to be maintained. That is an important Old Testament claim. The justification of God's ways is at one and the same time seen to be an issue of human integrity and a concern within the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 438.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 439.

divine assembly. The casual reader of the book, drawn to the intensity of the dialogues, will see the question as one raised out of human experience, which is indeed where human beings raise it. In Job, however, it is raised in the context of the machinery and procedures by which the divine council under the rule of Yahweh maintains a righteous order in nature and history.”<sup>14</sup>

**5. A final claim that needs little explication is found in *the recognition that the council of the Lord is the place where the goal of all creation, praise, begins.***<sup>15</sup>

“That is explicitly seen in the vision of Isaiah in Isaiah 6. It is a frequent theme of the psalms. At the conclusion of Psalm 103 when the kingship of Yahweh is declared, the psalmist concludes with a call to praise:

Bless the Lord, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his word,  
hearkening to the voice of his word.  
Bless the Lord, all his hosts,  
his ministers that do his will.  
Bless the Lord, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul (vv. 20–22).

Psalm 148 begins its orderly list of all the elements of the cosmos who are called to praise the Lord with a call to ‘all his angels ... all his hosts’ (v. 2), and Psalm 29 initiates the praise of the Lord who is enthroned forever as king by calling the divine ones (*b<sup>e</sup>nē ’ēlīm*) to ascribe glory to the Lord. If all reality finds its ultimate purpose in the praise of God, the divine assembly leads the choir.”<sup>16</sup>

**MSH:** It is vital to note that all the above is the context for all the New Testament discussion about believers in Christ: being “adopted” into God’s family, being “sons of God” and “children of God”; being “holy ones” [an OT angelic term]; being “partakers of the divine nature”; “being put over the nations [cp. Deut 32 worldview]; being the brothers and sisters of Jesus [Hebrews 2], who is above all angelic beings [Hebrews 1]; etc. Believers in Christ are the human/heavenly family of God, joining believer-imagers of the past and non-human imagers loyal to Yahweh in a re-constituted divine council-family over a new earth/new Eden. None of this comes by human plans or hands.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 439.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 440.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 440.