

# STUDIA ANTIQUA

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A STUDENT JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY  
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FALL 2013

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

In this issue of *Studia Antiqua*, we have two excellent articles from scholars at Brigham Young University. The first article is from Stephen O. Smoot, a senior at BYU studying ancient Near Eastern studies and German. Stephen's paper discusses the divine council, a Near Eastern motif, in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon. In his paper, Stephen argues that one can find a number of passages in the Book of Mormon which utilize this biblical theme, especially the visions of Lehi and Nephi. Stephen then analyzes these narratives in light of the biblical conception of the divine council. Our second paper comes from Jonathon M. Riley, a recent graduate of BYU in ancient Near Eastern studies. Jonathon's paper addresses the textual similarities between two ancient documents—*The Odyssey* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. He argues that one can establish a textual dependence between the two, and that the author of *The Odyssey* likely used an oral version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* when composing the famous Greek narrative.

As always, I am deeply grateful to the academic advisors who spur this work onward, especially the new faculty advisors Stephen D. Ricks and Cynthia Finlayson. In addition, Thomas Wayment, the new publications director for the Religious Studies Center, continually offers priceless insights and advice. His knowledge of the scholarly community and its issues is greatly needed to publish a work such as this. Also, once again, R. Devan Jensen and his crew of editors at the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University have been invaluable in bringing this journal to a professional level. This issue would not have been possible without the help of Terry Ball, Justin Barney, Eric D. Huntsman, and Paul Y. Hoskisson for peer reviewing the submitted articles. Their time is always precious, and I am grateful to them for their willingness to assist this publication.

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has contributed generously to the publication of this journal, as have Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Classics. We are deeply grateful for their support of the journal and the authors who publish in it. We wish to especially thank the Religious Studies Center, which provides the internship that makes it possible for us to dedicate the time necessary to publish this journal. Finally, Joany O. Pinegar continues to provide invaluable support for the publication of this journal.

As a final note, all citations, formatting, and abbreviations in this journal follow the *SBL Handbook of Style*. For further information and a guide to the abbreviations, please consult the *SBL Handbook*.

Brock M. Mason  
Editor, *Studia Antiqua*



## THE DIVINE COUNCIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

STEPHEN O. SMOOT

*Stephen O. Smoot is a senior at Brigham Young University pursuing degrees in ancient Near Eastern studies and German studies.*

*“I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him” (1 Kgs 22:19 NRSV).*

*“He saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8).*

The Book of Mormon is in many ways a book of the ancient Near East. The book's narrative begins in “the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4), shortly before the Babylonian decimation of Judah. Its primary authors were Israelites, and its later authors, and ultimate eponymous editor, were evidently familiar with Israelite religious, cultural, and literary conventions.<sup>1</sup> Even after centuries of likely integration and convergence with the cultures of ancient America,<sup>2</sup> the peoples

1. All citations from the Book of Mormon come from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009). See John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 77–91; David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, Utah: Heritage Press, 2003); Mevlin Deloy Pack, “Hebraisms,” in *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (ed. Dennis L. Largey; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2003), 321–25; Donald W. Parry, “Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 155–89.

2. On such, see generally John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985); “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–34; *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998); *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013); Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, six volumes (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007). See also Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding’:

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of the Book of Mormon retained certain religious and cultural aspects of the ancient Near East.

The Book of Mormon exhibits, in many respects, an intimate familiarity with ancient Israelite religious concepts. One such example is the Book of Mormon's portrayal of the divine council. Following a lucid biblical pattern, the Book of Mormon provides a depiction of the divine council and several examples of those who were introduced into the heavenly assembly and made partakers in divine secrets. This paper will demonstrate how the Book of Mormon captures and integrates this important aspect of ancient Israelite religion and creates a depiction of the heavenly council of God that fits well with the depiction of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

### Israelite Monotheism, Polytheism, and Monolatry

Before looking at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, we must look briefly at one aspect of Israelite religion. Texts such as the first commandment of the Decalogue, "you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:1),<sup>3</sup> the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut 6:4), and the anti-idolatry polemics of Isaiah (Isa 43:10–12; 44:6–8; 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–22) are typically marshaled to buttress the claim that the Hebrew Bible is strictly monotheistic, which is typically meant that the Hebrew Bible acknowledges the existence of only one deity. While it is commonplace to speak of the biblical depiction of God as monotheistic, there is, in fact, a more complex depiction of deity in the Hebrew Bible, including a depiction of a plurality of divine beings. To illustrate, Gerald Cooke begins his foundational 1964 study with the following admonition, "Any serious investigation of the conceptions of God in the Old Testament must deal with the recurrent references which suggest a pluralistic conception of deity."<sup>4</sup>

Nearly three decades after Cooke's article, Peter Hayman insisted that "monotheism," as understood and used today, is a misused term by modern readers to describe Israelite religion. "The pattern of Jewish beliefs about God remains monarchistic throughout," writes Hayman. By this he means that the Hebrew Bible depicts God as "king of a heavenly court consisting of many other powerful beings, not always under his control" and as "not the

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The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65; Mark Alan Wright and Brant Gardner, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 25–55.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. All Hebrew citations are from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

4. Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *ZAW* 35/1 (1964): 22.

only divine being.”<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Heiser has recently agreed that the question of Israelite “monotheism” is complex, and must be qualified. “‘Monotheism’ as it is currently understood means that no other gods exist. This term is inadequate for describing Israelite religion,” notes Heiser. He adds:

“Henotheism” and “monolatry,” while perhaps better, are inadequate because they do not say enough about what the canonical writer believed. Israel was certainly “monolatrous,” but that term comments only on what Israel believed about the proper object of worship, not what it believed about Yahweh’s nature and attributes with respect to the other gods.<sup>6</sup>

Mark S. Smith further warns against cavalierly tossing out terms such as “monotheism” and “polytheism” to describe the theology of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup> These terms, Smith reminds us, have nuanced meanings, and have been understood differently by various religious groups. The problem, according to Smith, lies in the fact that our modern terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” are just that—modern. The underlying concepts assumed in these theological terms would probably have been incoherent to ancient Israelites.<sup>8</sup>

Matters are further complicated by the fact that, according to Jan Assmann, ancient Israelite “monotheism” actually assumed a “polytheistic” notion of multiple deities. As Assmann explains,

This idea [monotheism] presupposes the existence of other gods. Paradoxically, the implied existence of other gods is of fundamental importance to the basic idea of biblical monotheism. The opposition of “God” and “gods” reflects the opposition of Israel and the nations (goyim, or gentiles), and the difference of uniqueness that sets “God” apart from the “gods” reflects the difference of being among the chosen or chosenness and of belonging within the b’rit (“covenant”) that sets Israel apart from the nations. In the same sense that the idea of the chosen people presupposes the existence of other peoples, the idea of the “one God” (YHWH echad) presupposes the existence of other gods. Decisive is not the oneness of God,

5. Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?” *JJS* 42/1 (Spring 1991): 15.

6. Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” *BBR* 18/1 (2008): 28–29, emphasis in original.

7. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10–14.

8. “Monotheism and polytheism in themselves hold little meaning for the ancients apart from the identity of the deities whom they revered and served. No polytheist thought of his belief-system as polytheist per se. If you asked ancient Mesopotamians if they were polytheists, the question would make no sense. If you asked them if they or the other people they knew acknowledge a variety of deities, that’s a different question, because for them the deities in question mattered, not the theoretical position of polytheism. The point applies to monotheism as well. If you asked ancient Israelites . . . if they were monotheists, they would not have understood the question. If you asked them if there is any deity apart from Yahweh, then that’s also another question, because for them what mattered was the exclusive claim and relationship of the Israelite people and their deity.” *Ibid.*, 11.



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which is a philosophical idea, but the difference of God . . . The biblical concept of God is not about absolute but about relational oneness.<sup>9</sup>

And so we are left wondering how to precisely describe the religious system of biblical Israel. Since our modern terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” may not do justice in describing the Israelite conception of God, we are put in an awkward position: how to translate biblical concepts into a modern vocabulary. Perhaps the closest modern word to describe Israelite religion is “monolatry”: “The worship of one god, esp. where other gods may be supposed to exist.”<sup>10</sup> In a monolatrous religious system, one deity is reserved for worship without explicitly denying the existence of other gods. This may be the most appropriate modern term to describe early Israelite religion, inasmuch as “monotheism” may be inadequate, “polytheism” too far-reaching, and “henotheism,” which posits that other familial, tribal or national gods may not only exist, but may also be the object of syncretic worship, does violence to the biblical injunction for Israel to reserve worship for Yahweh alone.

Keeping in mind that we cannot easily sum-up the religion of ancient Israel with only one word, but cautiously using “monolatry” as that one term for our present purposes, we can proceed to look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible.

#### The Council (and Counsel) of (the) God(s)

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of the divine council it frequently employs the noun  $\text{רַד}$ , which carries both the sense of “council” as well as “counsel.” One standard Hebrew lexicon informs us that  $\text{רַד}$  can mean either a “council, in familiar conversation . . . divan or circle of familiar friends . . . assembly, company” or a “counsel, taken by those in familiar conversation . . . secret counsel, which may be revealed.”<sup>11</sup> The latter sense of  $\text{רַד}$  is comparable to the Greek noun  $\mu\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\sigma\iota\omicron\nu$ ,<sup>12</sup> although this only goes so far in adequately conveying the sense of the Hebrew, which is much more complex than simply “mystery.”<sup>13</sup> In his discussion of  $\text{רַד}$  in the Hebrew Bible, S. B. Parker informs

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9. Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 3–4.

10. Oxford English Dictionary, online edition, s.v. “monolatry.”

11. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, reprint ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2011), s.v.  $\text{רַד}$ , emphasis in original. See also Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), s.v.  $\text{רַד}$ .

12. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v.  $\mu\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\sigma\iota\omicron\nu$ .

13. For a discussion, see Heinz-Josef Fabry, “ $\text{רַד}$ ,” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Riiinggren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry;

us that the word “may be applied to both the human and divine spheres.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as Taylor Halverson explains, “Just as a royal court consists of different members with different roles and purposes (e.g., counselor, messenger, jester, warrior, or bodyguard), so too God’s heavenly court was composed of a variety of heavenly beings.”<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew Bible itself offers varied terminology for God’s council, including:

1. The Assembly of God (עדת-אל).<sup>16</sup>
2. The Congregation of the Holy Ones (קהל קדשים).<sup>17</sup>
3. The Council of the Holy Ones (סוד-קדשים).<sup>18</sup>
4. The Council of Yahweh (סוד יהוה).<sup>19</sup>
5. The Council of God (סוד אלוה).<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, just as the biblical authors use a number of different names to refer to the divine council itself, they also used a litany of names and titles for its members. Stephen A. Geller writes, “Older, especially poetic, texts portray the deity as seated among the assembly of divine beings, who are sometimes . . . called bene ‘el(im) (‘the sons of gods’), kedoshim (‘holy ones’), among other terms.”<sup>21</sup> Ronald Hendel, in his introductory remarks on Israelite religion, straightforwardly informs us that “[Yahweh] . . . was not . . . the only god in Israelite religion. Like a king in his court, Yahweh was served by lesser deities, variously called “the sons of God,” “the host of heaven,” and similar titles.”<sup>22</sup> Turning to the Hebrew Bible, we see ample justification for these claims. Throughout the biblical texts the names for the members of Yahweh’s court include:

1. The Host(s) of (the) Heaven(s) (צבא השמים and צבאות).<sup>23</sup>

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Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986), 5:775–782.

14. S. B. Parker, “Council,” in *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 391.

15. Taylor Halverson, “The Path of Angels: A Biblical Pattern for the Role of Angels in Physical Salvation,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 154.

16. Ps 82:1.

17. Ps 89:5.

18. Ps 89:7.

19. Jer 23:18.

20. Job 15:8.

21. Stephen A. Geller, “The Religion of the Bible,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2027–28.

22. Ronald Hendel, “Israelite Religion,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), xlv.

23. 1 Kgs 22:19; Neh 9:6; Isa 37:16; Ps 89:8; 148:2; Jer 33:22; 44:25; Dan 8:10; Hag 2:6; Mal 3:10.

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2. Gods (אלהים and אלים).<sup>24</sup>
3. Sons of the Most High (בני עליון).<sup>25</sup>
4. Sons of God(s) (בני אלהים).<sup>26</sup>
5. (The) Heavens (שמים).<sup>27</sup>
6. Morning Stars (כוכבי בקר).<sup>28</sup>
7. Angels (מלאכים).<sup>29</sup>

As we see, the ancient Israelites were not reticent to describe the סוד.

### The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible

According to the priestly account of the creation (Gen 1:1–2:4a), the last creative command of God (אלהים) was, “Let us [נעשה] make humankind [אדם] in our image [בצלמנו], according to our likeness [כדמותנו]” (Gen 1:26). The presence of the first person plural prefix on עשה and the first person common plural suffix on both צלם and דמות has long perplexed Christian and Jewish exegetes, whose strict monotheism did not allow them to even entertain the idea of a plurality of gods.<sup>30</sup> However, when the plurals here and elsewhere (e.g. Gen 11:5–7) are read in light of the divine council, a plausible exegesis immediately arises. “The plural us, our . . . probably refers to the divine beings who compose God’s heavenly court,” writes David M. Carr in a succinct

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24. Ex 15:11; Deut 10:17; 32:8, 43; Josh 22:22; Ps 8:5; 82:1, 6; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:9; 135:5; 138:1.

25. Ps 82:6–7.

26. Gen 6:2, 4; Job 2:1; 38:7; Ps 29:1; 89:6. For an excellent discussion, see S. B. Parker, “Sons of (The) God(s),” in *DDD*, 1499–1510.

27. Ps 89:6.

28. Job 38:7.

29. Gen 28:12; Ps 78:49; 91:11; 103:20; 148:2.

30. More traditional exegetes have offered the argument that this is an example of the phenomenon termed *pluralis majestatis*. Briefly stated, the idea is that monarchs, when acting in an official or courtly capacity, are known to address themselves in the plural (“we,” “us,” etc.) and so God, who is the ultimate monarch, can rightly address himself in the plural. (This is, incidentally, how God addresses himself in many of the Surahs of the Qu’ran.) J. R. Dummelow offers the *pluralis majestatis* explanation as one possibility for explaining the plurals of Gen 1:26–27 in his popular, though now outdated, commentary. See *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, ed. J. R. Dummelow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1920), 5. Some Latter-day Saint writers have also used this explanation. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1915), 38.

representation of the view of many modern biblical scholars,<sup>31</sup> which includes Hendel,<sup>32</sup> Levenson,<sup>33</sup> Cooke,<sup>34</sup> Brettler<sup>35</sup> and others.

Another instance in the Hebrew Bible where a plurality in the text is depicted is the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: “Comfort [נחמו], O comfort [נחמו] my people, says your God [אלהיכם]. Speak [דברו] tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry [קראו] to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1–2). This passage employs the plural imperative suffix on the verbs throughout. Likewise, the subject אלהים features the masculine plural possessive suffix. This, in conjunction with other contextual and linguistic evidence, led Frank M. Cross, Jr. in 1953 and Christopher R. Seitz in 1990 to both conclude that the divine council is being addressed in this text.<sup>36</sup> As summarized by J. J. M. Roberts, “God commissions the divine council to issue a message of consolation to the people of Israel, and the prophet, who overhears the voices of the council, clarifies the message. . . . [The] imperatives are all plural, addressed to the angelic members of God’s royal council.”<sup>37</sup>

Besides hinting at the divine council in technical grammatical constructions, there are also fairly explicit narrative depictions of prophets being enraptured in heavenly visions and receiving the סוד. The biblical precedence for this phenomenon is readily discernable in a passage beloved by Latter-day Saints: “Surely the Lord God [אדני יהוה] will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [סודו] unto his servants the prophets [הנביאים]” (Amos 3:7 KJV). More than merely a “secret,” the סוד in this passage is arguably not just confidential

31. David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed.; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

32. Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 6. “The plural seems to refer to the lesser deities of the divine assembly described in other biblical texts.”

33. Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14. “The plural construction (Let us . . .) most likely reflects a setting in the divine council . . . God the King announces the proposed course of action to His cabinet of subordinate deities, though he alone retains the power of decision.

34. Cooke, “The Sons of (The) God(s),” 22–23. “[I]t must be acknowledged as at least a strong possibility that [Gen 1:26–27] represent[s] a conception of a plurality of divine beings.”

35. Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42–43. “[T]he text is implicitly portraying God in terms of a human king: God is talking to his royal counselors or cabinet . . . The creation of people is so significant that this creative act alone demands God consult his cabinet, comprised of angels or other divine figures.”

36. Frank M. Cross, Jr., “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah,” *JNES* 12/4 (Oct. 1953): 274–77; Christopher R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 109/2 (1990): 229–47.

37. J. J. M. Roberts, “Isaiah,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 961.

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instruction delivered by God, but also the manifestation of God's heavenly court.

That the  $\text{סד}$  functions as both divine instruction as well as God's council is seen clearly in 1 Kgs 22. In this pericope, controversy arises over whether Judah and Israel are to recommence their warfare with Aram. While king Ahab of Israel declares his earnest desire to go to war, king Jehoshaphat of Judah remains reluctant, until he can be assured victory by "the word of the Lord" (1 Kgs 22:1–12). The prophet Micaiah is consulted, who prophesies defeat for Ahab and Jehoshaphat if they go to war (1 Kgs 22:13–18). Skeptical of the veracity of this oracle, Ahab presses Micaiah to furnish his prophetic credentials, whereupon Micaiah proclaims:

I saw the Lord [יהוה] sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven [צבא השמים] standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit [רוח] came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, "I will entice him." "How?" the Lord asked him. He replied, "I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." Then the Lord said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it." So you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you. (1 Kgs 22:19–23)

This text provides an excellent example of how a prophet received the  $\text{סד}$ . It included both a theophany of Yahweh on his throne surrounded by his heavenly retinue and subsequently being made privy to confidential heavenly secrets. The prophet Zechariah experienced a similar theophany of Yahweh and his heavenly court, and the pattern is repeated: a theophany of God and his attending host and the disclosure of divine secrets (Zech 1:7–17).

The book of Job further furnishes a description of the function of the divine council, albeit without any explicit prophetic commission. Beginning in Job 1 and continuing into Job 2, a company of the בני האלהים, whom Robert Alter identifies as God's "celestial entourage,"<sup>38</sup> convenes before Yahweh in his court. Included among the בני האלהים is השטן, "the accuser" or "the adversary" (Job 1:6–7; 2:1). The council deliberates over Job's faithfulness, with the accuser insisting that Job only remains faithful because of his abundant blessings (Job 1:7–12; 2:2–8). To prove Job's faithfulness, the accuser is allowed by Yahweh to vex Job.

Finally, we turn to the Psalms for a glimpse at a series of poetic depictions of the divine council. Despite the protestations of some interpreters to

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38. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 12.

the contrary, Psalm 82 is in fact “the textbook passage” to “demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible assumes and affirms the existence of other gods.”<sup>39</sup> This psalm opens with a depiction of God taking “his place in the divine council [בעדה-אל]” and holding judgment “in the midst of the gods [בקרר אלהים]” (Ps 82:1). After reprimanding these gods for failing to uphold their divine mandates (Ps 82:3–4), God then issues a warning: “I say, ‘You are gods [אלהים], children of the Most High [בני עליון], all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals [כאדם], and fall like any prince [השרים]” (Ps 82:6–7).

Some have gone to great lengths to argue that these “gods” in Ps 82 are mortals, perhaps judges or magistrates, but this argument fails for many reasons. Besides the insurmountable linguistic and exegetical absurdities in such a reading, when the imagery of Ps 82 is compared with other Psalms, such as Ps 29:1<sup>40</sup> and Ps 89:5–8 (see below), it becomes clear that these gods cannot be humans, but must be divine beings.<sup>41</sup>

In turning to Ps 89, we see a striking depiction of the divine assembly of Yahweh.

Let the heavens [שמים] praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones [בקהל קדשים]. For who in the skies [בשחק] can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings [בני אלים] is like the Lord, God feared in the council of the holy ones [בסוד-קדשים], great and awesome above all that are around him [על-כל סביביו]? (Ps 89:5–7)

In typical imagery found in other biblical passages describing the divine council (that, as we shall see, is also present in the Book of Mormon), the heavenly assembly of the sons of the gods in this psalm is said to be surrounding [סבב] the incomparably awesome Yahweh. Thus, to insist that Ps 82 is the exception to a fairly explicit and consistent rule in the psalms is nothing more than special pleading.

To summarize, the Hebrew Bible contains rich and dramatic depictions of God’s סוד, which is both the heavenly secrets he reveals to his prophets as well as his intimate cabinet of attending divine beings that he consults from time to

39. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 2. Rebecca Lesses agrees, noting that “the divine council also appears in Ps 82.1, where its members are called ‘gods’ (elohim).” See Rebecca Lesses, “Divine Beings,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 544.

40. “Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings [בני אלים], ascribe to the Lord strength and glory.”

41. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” 18–20; Daniel C. Peterson, “Ye Are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witness to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Daniel C. Peterson; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), esp. 475–84.

time in his dealings. As we've seen, these lesser deities are clearly depicted as existing just as much as Yahweh himself (thus negating the use of "monotheism"). However, these deities are never said to be the objects of proper worship by the prophets who participate in the  $\text{רַב}$  (thus negating the use of "polytheism" or "henotheism").<sup>42</sup>

If space permitted, we would look more closely at additional depictions of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible. Suffice it to say that this brief survey suggests that the Hebrew Bible is saturated with descriptions of the divine council.<sup>43</sup>

### The Divine Council in the Book of Mormon

We now turn our attention to the presence of the divine council in the Book of Mormon. Before we begin our investigation, it must be conceded that the Book of Mormon's depiction of the divine council is neither as frequent nor explicit as the depiction in the Hebrew Bible. The reason(s) for this lack of explicit detail could very well include the fact that, by their own admission, Book of Mormon authors and redactors were obliged to heavily abridge these accounts due to the lack of space on their writing medium, i.e., the plates of Nephi and Mormon (Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Mormon 8:5; 9:33–34; Ether 15:33). Another likely reason, as suggested by Mark Alan Wright, is that as Lehite prophets integrated with the predominant culture around them (Wright argues that culture was ancient Mesoamerica, specifically), they began to more readily couch their experiences in the language and paradigm of ancient Mesoamerica, rather than the ancient Near East. As Wright notes, "Each prophet was a product of his own culture, and the manner in which the divine was manifested to the prophets was largely defined by the semiotics of their culture."<sup>44</sup>

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42. Indeed, *4QDeut<sup>a</sup>* and the LXX goes so far as having Moses imploring these deities themselves to worship Yahweh in Deut 32:43. See Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1999), 193.

43. For a thorough look at the divine council in the Hebrew Bible, see Peterson, "Ye Are Gods," 472–594. Many of the subjects discussed in this paper are more fully treated by Peterson. Another look at the divine council from a Latter-day Saint perspective is found in Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints* (ed. C. Wilfred Griggs; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 173–98. Peterson's article approaches the subject with a stronger exegetical reading, while McConkie's article is eisegetical in nature by looking at the subject more through the lenses of modern Latter-day Saint theology. The two should therefore provide a good balance when read alongside each other.

44. Wright, "According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding" 51.

Be that as it may, there are nevertheless narrative details in the Book of Mormon that do indicate a presence of the divine council. In fact, the Book of Mormon wastes no time in introducing the divine council to its readers. After a characteristically Near Eastern colophon,<sup>45</sup> Nephi begins his account by describing the prophetic commission of his father Lehi. Embedded within his account is specific language indicating that Lehi followed the example of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible who also received Yahweh's סוד.

The account in 1 Nephi begins with a report of Lehi's prophetic activity in Jerusalem on the eve of its razing by Nebuchadnezzar II, the king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who suppressed an unsuccessful Judahite uprising and sacked Judah's capital in 587 BCE.

Wherefore it came to pass that my father Lehi, as he went forth, prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people. And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him, and he saw and heard much. And because of the things which he saw and heard, he did quake and tremble exceedingly. (1 Nephi 1:5-6)

What did Lehi see that was so terrible? Nephi reports that his father "saw the heavens open and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:7-8).<sup>46</sup> From the midst of these heavenly beings,

He saw one descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noonday. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars of the firmament. And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. (1 Nephi 1:9-11)

One of these heavenly beings, Nephi writes, "came and stood before my father and gave unto him a book and bade him that he should read" (1 Nephi 1:11).<sup>47</sup> After reading this text containing heavenly, prophetic knowledge, including knowledge that "manifested plainly the coming of a Messiah" (1 Nephi 1:19), Lehi was prompted to recommence his previously tumultuous prophetic ca-

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45. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 17-18; John A. Tvedtnes, "Colophons in the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (ed. John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 13-17.

46. For the intriguing suggestion that the "numberless concourses of angels" represent a heavenly prayer circle, see Hugh Nibley, "Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past: The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/2 (2010): 70.

47. On the heavenly book motif in the Book of Mormon and the ancient Near East, see Brent E. McNeely, "The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 26-28.



reer by issuing a prophecy against Jerusalem and her inhabitants because of the iniquity of the people. Among other things, Lehi prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed and “many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:12–13, 18–20).

Finally, upon completion of this revelation, Lehi was overcome with ecstasy and joyfully exclaimed: “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish” (1 Nephi 1:14). Nephi concludes the account by noting, “[Lehi’s] soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shewn unto him” (1 Nephi 1:15).

Stephen D. Ricks has called attention to the parallels between the throne-theophany of Lehi and that of Isaiah,<sup>48</sup> and he concludes after a point-by-point analysis that the prophetic calls in both of these texts “establishes in the minds of the people the prophet’s authority and his extraordinary standing with the Lord.”<sup>49</sup> John W. Welch, building on earlier work,<sup>50</sup> has examined Lehi’s throne theophany not just within the confines of Isaiah’s prophetic commission, but also within a broader ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>51</sup> After an illuminating analysis, Welch argues that “Lehi’s prophetic attributes can be understood and confirmed in light of classical Israelite prophecy specific to his own contemporaneous world,” and, furthermore, that “his call as a prophet in 1 Nephi 1 gives a foundation of divine authority, revelation, and guidance for everything that follows father Lehi’s posterity throughout the Book of Mormon.”<sup>52</sup>

We can therefore reasonably infer that Nephi’s quick inclusion of his father’s prophetic call and receipt of the  $\text{רס}$  was to immediately establish the prophetic credibility of Lehi throughout the rest of Nephi’s narrative. It provides legitimacy for Lehi’s prophetic activities, similar to the example we’ve already seen with Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22. What’s more, with the inclusion of Lehi’s vision

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48. Stephen D. Ricks, “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 171–90.

49. *Ibid.*, 187.

50. Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne–Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form–Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 67–96; John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation* (ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 35–54.

51. John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 421–48.

52. *Ibid.*, 437–38.

of the divine council at the beginning of his narrative, it is possible that Nephi also wished to anticipate the opposition of his own brothers to Lehi's prophetic legitimacy (1 Nephi 2:11–13; 3:4–5).

Further insights into the prophetic commissions of Lehi and Isaiah come from David E. Bokovoy, whose work arguing that these are *סוד* narratives not only nicely compliments the earlier work of Ricks and Welch, but is now among the standard treatments on the subject.<sup>53</sup> Bokovoy argues:

Lehi appears, like Isaiah, as a messenger sent to represent the assembly that had convened in order to pass judgment upon Jerusalem for a violation of God's holy covenants. Nephi's account may represent this subtle biblical motif through a reference to Lehi assuming the traditional role of council member, praising the high god of the assembly.<sup>54</sup>

In turning to Isaiah 6 itself, we quickly discern several convergences between the two accounts. Exactly like Lehi, Isaiah is reported to have seen Yahweh "sitting on a throne, high and lofty" (Isa 6:1) and to have been introduced to the divine council ("Seraphs [who] were in attendance above [Yahweh]")<sup>55</sup> who praised Yahweh with acclamations of, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts [יהוה צבאות]; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3).<sup>56</sup> The reactions of Lehi and Isaiah are similar (with both prophets reacting to their respective theophanies with wonder and terror [1 Nephi 1:6; Isa 6:4–5]), as are their respective commissions to pass judgment upon the wicked inhabitants of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:13–15, 18–20; Isa 6:9–13).

A pertinent question is how closely (if at all) Nephi crafted the narrative of his father's *סוד* experience to mirror the prophetic call of Isaiah. Given Nephi's access to Isaiah's writings, which he quotes at length (2 Nephi 16 = Isa 6), and the evidence examined above, perhaps Nephi deliberately crafted, or "likened" (1 Nephi 19:23), the narrative of his father's experience to mirror Isaiah's. This

53. David E. Bokovoy, "On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah's Prophetic Call," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 29–49.

54. *Ibid.*, 37.

55. These seraphs are depicted as fiery attendants of Yahweh who extol Yahweh's holiness and carry out the purification of Isaiah (Isa 6:6–7). For more on the seraphim of Isa 6, see David G. Burke, "Seraph, Seraphim," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 687. That these seraphs constitute Yahweh's divine council seems likely given the very similar language employed in Isa 6 and the indisputable divine council scene in 1 Kgs 22, which we've reviewed above. See the comments by Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene," *JSOT* 31/3 (2007): 263, 269. Kee's entire article gives a very helpful look at the divine council not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in other Canaanite and Mesopotamian religious literature.

56. The angelic song of praise in both Lehi's and Isaiah's experience is a literary device called the Qedussa, which is discussed by Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission," 80–81.

suggests a very cogent and conscious literary development of the narrative of Lehi's  $\pi\sigma$  vision in 1 Nephi 1. Perhaps Nephi paid careful attention to formulate his father's vision to read like the visions of other biblical prophets, particularly Isaiah, and he established a logical beginning point that would establish Lehi as a prophet. This is not to negate the reality of Lehi's vision, or to otherwise suggest it was a merely literary tale, but rather to say that Nephi consciously employed subtle literary techniques in his depiction of Lehi's vision.

Important to note in this regard is Alma's  $\pi\sigma$  experience reported in Alma 36, which directly quotes the text of Lehi's throne theophany. While in his near-death state after being rebuked by an angel, Alma relates the following to his son Helaman: "Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (Alma 36:22). Thereafter Alma reported his reception of heavenly knowledge through this theophany, namely, that "inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God, ye shall prosper in the land" (see Alma 36:1, 5, 26, 30), which is what in turn prompted him to commence his missionary activities in declaring repentance to a wicked Nephite society. As with Isaiah and Lehi, Alma was commissioned to be a prophet in the same pattern: he was called up into God's divine council (note that Alma is said to have both seen God and been instructed by angels), given heavenly knowledge, and commissioned to preach a divine message (Alma 36:24–26; cf. Mosiah 27:32–37). And, like Nephi, it seems that Mormon took extra care to ensure that his readers would catch the connection between Lehi's commission and Alma's. He even goes so far as to directly quote Alma as repeating the words of Lehi found on the small plates.

Continuing further into Nephi's narrative, we turn to the account in 1 Nephi 11. In this text we read of Nephi "pondering in [his] heart" the meaning of another of his father's many visions. Nephi is then suddenly "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1) and engages in a dialogue with "the Spirit," who interrogates Nephi on whether he believes the vision of his father (1 Nephi 11:4). Nephi answers in the affirmative, whereupon the Spirit, like the seraphs of Isa 6 and the angels of 1 Nephi 1, proclaims, "Hosanna to the Lord, the Most High God, for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all" (1 Nephi 11:6). What follows is a revelation wherein Nephi is granted the same (or at least a similar) version of the vision of his father in 1 Nephi 8 and the interpretation of the symbols thereof.

Certainly there is much to be said of this account, including the fact that it captures other authentic aspects of pre-exilic Israelite religion.<sup>57</sup> We turn again to Bokovoy, who offers a reading of this text as Nephi's own  $\pi\sigma$  experience.<sup>58</sup> When read in light of our understanding of the divine council, this text reveals "that Nephi's conversation . . . echoes an ancient temple motif. As part of this paradigm . . . the text depicts the Spirit of the Lord in a role associated with members of the divine council in both biblical and general Near Eastern conceptions."<sup>59</sup> Specifically, Bokovoy argues that the exchange between Nephi and the Spirit mirror other biblical and ancient Near Eastern  $\pi\sigma$  dialogues. What's more, the exchange in 1 Nephi 11, when coupled with the accounts of King Benjamin (Mosiah 5) and the brother of Jared (Ether 2–3) constitute a type scene or "template for depicting an official encounter between witness and worshiper in preparation for the introduction to advanced revelatory truths" that is recurrent throughout the Book of Mormon.<sup>60</sup> In the case of the account in 1 Nephi 11, Bokovoy concludes:

Nephi participated in a celestial ascent to an exceedingly high mountain possessed by the most high God. The description of this experience in 1 Nephi 11 shares much in common with traditional Near Eastern imagery concerning the divine assembly and invocation of heavenly beings as council witnesses. In this context, Nephi's exchange with the Spirit of the Lord provides a dramatic portrayal of the faith necessary to receive introduction to advanced spiritual truth. Through his testimony, as born to the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi proved himself worthy to pass by the heavenly sentinel and enter the realm of greater light and knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

Nephi's inclusion of the account of his own  $\pi\sigma$  experience can further be seen to perpetuate the same goal as the inclusion of his father's. Remember that one aspect of the  $\pi\sigma$  narrative is to establish the legitimacy of a prophet's calling, particularly in a time of controversy, such as in a situation where competing claims to prophetic authority creates strife.<sup>62</sup> This fact, if true, casts Nephi's

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57. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scriptures, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (ed. Davis Bitton; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243; Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (ed. John W. Welch; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 69–82.

58. David E. Bokovoy, "'Thou Knowest That I Believe': Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23.

59. *Ibid.*, 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

61. *Ibid.*, 22.

62. This can be seen, for instance, in Jer 23, where Jeremiah's prophetic competitors who have not been introduced to Yahweh's council are dismissed as illegitimate (v. 18, 22). See the commentary by Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*

account of his  $\pi\sigma$  experience in a new light. Recall the tension that rises between Nephi and his elder brothers over matters relating to the interpretation and meaning of their father's vision. Upon returning to his family after his sequestered vision, Nephi is "grieved" (1 Nephi 15:4) to discover that his brothers "were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them." The cause of this contention was due to the esoteric nature of Lehi's vision, "which was hard to be understood save a man should inquire of the Lord" (1 Nephi 15:3). "Behold," the brothers lament in reference to aspects their father's vision, "we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken" (1 Nephi 15:7). Nephi then instructs his brothers that their ignorance stems from the fact that, unlike him, they have not inquired of God, and therefore were not privileged to receive the requisite knowledge needed to understand their father's vision.

Nephi thus establishes his own credibility as his father's prophetic successor. Having participated in the  $\pi\sigma$ , Nephi was granted the heavenly secrets needed to know and understand the apocalyptic visions granted to his father (1 Nephi 15:8–11). These same heavenly secrets were not imparted to Nephi's brothers, who were barred from participating in the  $\pi\sigma$  because of "the hardness of [their] hearts" (1 Nephi 15:10). "Do ye not remember," Nephi urges his brothers, "the thing which the Lord hath said?—if ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you" (1 Nephi 15:11).

Continuing further into the Book of Mormon, we discover an account in Mosiah 22 that serves as a council text on a temporal level. In ancient Near Eastern thought, the earthly court of the king was (at least ideally) the earthly counterpart to God's heavenly council. In this chapter, Ammon and Limhi "consult" (one could say "counsel") with the people as to how they should "deliver themselves out of bondage" (Mosiah 22:1). The people "gather[ed] themselves together" and deliberated for some time, with Gideon eventually presenting himself before the king with a desire to "be [the king's] servant and deliver this people out of bondage" (Mosiah 22:4). Gideon successfully pleads his case (Mosiah 22:5–8), and is commissioned to be an agent of the king's in delivering a perfidious tribute of wine to their Lamanites captors in order to incapacitate them during the people's escape (Mosiah 22:9–16). The format of the proceedings of the council scene in Mosiah 22 follows that of the divine

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(Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–60. "Unlike these [false] prophets, who are so readily dismissed, it is to be inferred that Jeremiah did indeed stand in the divine council, was sent by YHWH, and so speaks a true word (see 23:18)."

council scenes in 1 Kgs 22 and Isa 6 and 40 nicely, albeit on a temporal level. In these accounts, when a problem arises, members of the council deliberate and consult for a solution, and one of the members of the divine council (a heavenly being or a prophet) is eventually sent as an agent of the king (or God) to fulfill the desire of the council.<sup>63</sup>

Another possible divine council narrative can be found in Helaman 10, although with some irregularities. Regardless of these irregularities, this narrative is worth looking at, as it offers some details that seem to indicate a divine council scene. In this account, Nephi, the son of Helaman, returns defeated after being rejected as a prophet by the people of Nephi: “And it came to pass that there arose a division among the people, insomuch that they divided hither and thither and went their ways” (Helaman 10:1). This is a classic set up for a divine council narrative, where controversy arises that will eventually need settling by prophetic intervention. Nephi, in retreat, retires “towards his own house” and begins pondering “upon the things which the Lord had shewn unto him” (Helaman 10:2). As Nephi pondered his situation “a voice came unto him” and delivered divine consolation (Helaman 10:3). What follows is God’s reaffirmation of Nephi’s prophetic call (cf. Helaman 7:1–2). “Behold, thou art Nephi and I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels that ye shall have power over this people” (Helaman 7:6). Note that God is said to declare this in his council of angels, a significant detail.

What makes this possible divine council account irregular is that Nephi is never explicitly said to have seen God and his council, but rather that a voice merely came to him. This silence does not entirely rule out the possibility that Nephi did indeed see the council as he heard the voice, but the lack of an affirmatively explicit narrative detail is such that it cannot be positively said that he did. Another irregularity is that God, and not one of his divine messengers, is said to have given Nephi his call directly. In the examples previously examined, it is one of the messengers of the council that delivers the report or commission. Notwithstanding these irregularities, what follows after the commission is similar to the prophetic call narratives examined in this paper, as Nephi “did return unto the multitudes . . . and began to declare unto them the word of the Lord” straightway after his theophany (Helaman 10:12).

## Conclusion

Much more could be said about the divine council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon than this brief survey will allow. Besides the examples

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63. I am grateful to my friend Neal Rappleye for introducing me to this reading of Mosiah 22.

cited in this paper, there remain other narratives possibly depicting the divine council in the Book of Mormon that deserve our close attention (including 3 Nephi 17:11–25; 28). The examples of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible discussed in this investigation likewise deserve closer scrutiny. In the end, this paper by no means presumes to be the final say on the matter, but is rather an invitation for the reader to look more carefully at the function of the divine council in these two ancient Near Eastern records.





“LOVE THE CHILD WHO HOLDS YOU BY THE HAND”:  
INTERTEXTUALITY IN  
*THE ODYSSEY AND THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

JONATHON M. RILEY

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For many years, scholars have noticed similarities between the texts of ancient Greece and texts from the ancient Near East, leading them to suggest that the Greeks may have borrowed literary elements from the ancient Near East in creating the works that would prove to be the foundation of western literature. As early as the 1600s, people have been trying to find the connection between ancient Near Eastern and Greek literature, and that pursuit has continued until the present day.<sup>1</sup> Many in the past noticed similarities between the *Iliad* and the Hebrew Bible, and with the decipherment of cuneiform and hieroglyphs the possibilities for literary comparison between the regions have become nearly endless.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars, such as Walter Burkert, have explored the many shared motifs in ancient Near Eastern and classical texts. However, it is possible that some texts may share more than just motifs. It is possible that *The Odyssey* may take much of its overall structure from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

### Methodology

In order to make the assertion that *The Odyssey* borrows from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh* must meet a few basic conditions that could allow the reader to say with some confidence that Homer may have been familiar with it.<sup>3</sup> A useful summary of basic conditions used to illustrate textual borrowing

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1. R. N. Burnet, “An Account of a Book,” in *Archeologiae Philosophicae, Five Doctrina Antiqua de Rerum Originibus* (Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 17, 1693), 796–97.

2. Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–8.

3. *The Odyssey* is generally attributed to Homer, so this piece will refer to Homer as the “author” of the text. It is more likely that the text is taken from an oral tradition which evolved over time and was eventually compiled by Homer, but because this piece is mostly

was originally laid down by Dennis R. Macdonald,<sup>4</sup> but some of these conditions have been updated to conform to Lawson Younger's propinquity rules to provide a more comprehensive set of conditions for textual comparison.<sup>5</sup>

The conditions are as follows:

1. Linguistic availability
2. Geographical availability
3. Cultural availability
4. Chronological availability
5. Analogy
6. Density
7. Order
8. Interpretability

These conditions reflect the methodology that is common to this field and are very similar to the ones employed by Burkert in much of his work comparing the Near Eastern and Classical literature. In fact, many of the details regarding the relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* have already been explored in this way, and I will rely on those secondary treatments in this piece. However, this methodology may be able to uncover that *The Odyssey* relies more heavily on *Gilgamesh* than has previously been supposed.

The first condition is linguistic availability. For a text to be linguistically available, enough people must be able to understand the language that the hypotext<sup>6</sup> is written in so that it becomes plausible that a given culture or person was familiar with it.

The second condition is geographic availability. For a text to be geographically available, copies of the hypotext must appear near where the final product is produced.

The third condition is cultural availability. Cultural availability means that the hypotext must come from a culture similar enough that it is logical for the author to use it in his text. This may often be determined by comparing the literature of both cultures.

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concerned with how *Gilgamesh* is used in *The Odyssey* rather than who is doing the writing, I will discuss *The Odyssey* and *Iliad* as Homer's creations.

4. Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 8–9.

5. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), xxxvii–ix.

6. The text being alluded to.

The fourth condition is chronological availability. This indicates that copies of the text were found that date to around the same time the author was doing his writing.

The fifth condition is analogy. For this condition to be met, it must be fairly common for authors from the time and place being examined (Greece during the time of Homer in this case) to copy other texts from around the same time and place as the hypotext being proposed (the ancient Near East before Homer, in this case).

The sixth condition, density, means that there is more than one significant parallel between the texts, and this condition must refer to more than just the volume of parallels. Many insignificant parallels would not suffice; there must be many significant parallels.

Order, the seventh condition, means that the parallels must be basically in the same order, which is to say that the structure of the narrative events must be the same. The more often they are in the same order, the more likely it is that borrowing is taking place.

The eighth and final condition is interpretability, or the ability of the hypotext to explain the text being studied.

I propose that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* satisfies all of the above conditions for demonstrating a textual relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* and I will argue that *The Odyssey* borrows from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

### *Linguistic Availability*

The first condition that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* meets in relation to *The Odyssey* is the condition of linguistic availability. This means that one must determine whether or not a large number of Greeks would have been able to read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* at all. Thanks to the significant distribution of copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* throughout the ancient Near East, this condition could be met in two primary ways: through the Levant or through Anatolia.<sup>7</sup>

In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, evidence of Achaean merchants begins to appear in the Levant. One of the best examples of this is the Greek settlement at Al Mina on the Orontes River in northern Syria. Most of the material culture of these people matches other things found in ancient Greece; in fact, we have enough evidence about them to know that they came from Naxos, Samos, and Euboea.<sup>8</sup> Despite the people's obviously Greek background, however, their

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7. A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1–5.

8. Sven-Tage Teodorsson, "Eastern Literacy, Greek Alphabet, and Homer," *Mnemosyne* 59/2 (2006): 166–67.

texts are a surprising hodge-podge of ancient languages. Based on the cuneiform tablets and ostraca available cataloging their economic endeavors, it is clear that these Achaeans in the Levant, or people they were associating with, were reading cuneiform texts in languages from ancient Mesopotamia. There is some evidence that many of these men returned to Greece, and this meant that there was likely a group of men in Greece who could have been familiar with the literary works of the East. It seems unlikely that these merchants were actually reading copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, as literacy in any language seems to have been uncommon for Greeks at that time.<sup>9</sup>

Another way that the Greeks could have gotten *The Epic of Gilgamesh* through the Levant is by way of the Phoenicians. In the above example, the Greeks could have gone to the Levant, learned Akkadian, and come back to Greece and passed along stories like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. More likely, however, is the option that people originally from the East came to Greece and stayed there.

In the ninth century BCE, the Assyrians conquered Syria and Phoenicia, and we know from archeological findings throughout Lebanon that the Assyrians brought much of their literature with them, including *Gilgamesh*.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, there is evidence for a significant amount of Phoenician economic and settlement activity throughout traditionally Greek regions such as Cyprus and Crete from the ninth century onward. Evidence of Phoenician contact has also been seen on Samos, Delos, and Rhodes.<sup>11</sup> It is possible therefore that, rather than the Greeks having to learn Eastern languages in order to become acquainted with the literary tradition of the east, perhaps the Phoenicians learned Greek in order to communicate with the Greek portion of their trading network. As a result, the Phoenicians could have recited much of their literature orally in this way to a Greek audience, thus introducing the epics of the East to the Greeks.

The third possibility, which may be the most likely, also includes the settlement of Easterners in traditionally Greek areas. It is commonly accepted that the Hittite empire at its peak extended from Western Anatolia through Northern Syria, and that its influence extended throughout the entire Anatolian peninsula. However, this empire collapsed around 1200 BCE under the weight of numerous attacks from a mysterious group known as the Sea Peoples, a group of loosely-unified raiders whose origins ranged from Sardinia

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9. Louis H. Feldman, "Homer and the Near East: The Rise of the Greek Genius," *BA* 59/1 (1996): 14.

10. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 2.

11. Feldman, "Homer and the Near East," 13.

to part of the western coast of Anatolia. Among these were some Achaeans, and it is likely that the story of the sack of Troy preserved in the *Iliad* reflects the activities of the Greek portion of the Sea Peoples.<sup>12</sup>

At first glance, this seems to be largely irrelevant to a discussion of the possibility of *Gilgamesh* being linguistically available in Ancient Greece. However, a copy of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* written in Hittite was discovered in the heart of the Hittite capital, dating from the second half of the fourteenth century BCE, and since the Hittites were in control of western Anatolia at the time, it is reasonable to assume that the inhabitants of the west coast of Anatolia could have understood the Hittite version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* if it were told to them.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, it is possible that the accounts of the Achaeans taking prisoners back to Greece after the Trojan War as slaves are mostly accurate. It is also possible that some of these prisoners, taken back to Greece, would have eventually learned Greek after being there for a time, thus being able to tell the story of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Greek.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is possible that the very people whom the Greeks defeated in the *Iliad* may have contributed, years down the road, to the *Iliad's* literary richness.

There is another possibility concerning the Hittites that relates to the Greek colonization of western Anatolia. During the decline of the Hittite Empire, there were a number of Greek trading centers in Western Anatolia where the Greek inhabitants were surrounded by the native population and likely had to learn Hittite in order to trade effectively.<sup>15</sup> Thus it seems possible that these traders might have learned Hittite and known how to understand the story of *Gilgamesh* as told by the Hittites.

Because the issue of linguistic availability is one of the most difficult ones when it comes to the relationship between *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, it is essential to establish that there are multiple possibilities for how people in Greece might have been familiar with eastern languages well enough to be able to be familiar with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It seems possible that some Greeks knew eastern languages.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Trevor R. Bryce, "The Trojan War: Is There Truth behind the Legend?" *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 65/3 (2002): 187–88.

13. Gary Beckman, "Gilgamesh in Hatti," in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner Jr. on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. Gary Beckman, Richard Beal, and Gregory McMahon; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 38–39.

14. Bryce, "The Trojan War," 192–93.

15. Trevor R. Bryce, "Anatolian Scribes in Mycenaean Greece," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 48/3 (1999): 258–59.

16. Feldman, "Homer and the Near East," 14.

### *Geographical Availability*

The second issue of availability that has to be addressed is the issue of geographic availability. How could something written in Mesopotamia make it all the way over to Greece? Once again, there are a few possible answers to this question based on which translation of *Gilgamesh* the Greeks might have had. One possible option is the Greek traders in northern Syria. There are copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that have been discovered from around where these Greeks were settled, so bringing the story back with them to Greece would have been possible.<sup>17</sup> Another possible option is the Phoenicians. As stated above, copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* have been found in Phoenicia, and since the Phoenicians had significant settlements in traditionally Greek areas, it is possible that they could have spread *The Epic of Gilgamesh* orally to the Greeks they interacted with in places like Crete and Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> However, I will argue that the question of textual borrowing in this case can best be answered by the Hittites.

Geographically speaking, the Hittite heartland is the closest place to Greece where *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has been found. Archeological investigations into the Hittite capital have yielded some possibilities for textual contact between the Greeks and the Hittites. The first thing that must be understood about the possible relationship between the Greeks and the Hittites is the probable Hittite name for the Mycenaean region: Ahhiyawah. The original reason people made this connection was because "Ahhiyawa" sounds suspiciously like "Achaea," and on further investigation, it seems that this intuition may have been correct. In fact, when we see the Mycenaean Greeks in Hittite texts, they are called Ahhiyawans. This find allows scholars to see how the Hittites interacted with the Greeks and shows that they had a diplomatic relationship that would have made the geographical gap between Anatolia and Greece less of an issue.<sup>19</sup> One point that may validate this assumption is that even though the alphabet used by the Greeks was adopted generally from the East, the direction of the writing, left to right rather than right to left, was likely adopted from late Hittite Hieroglyphs. There is an abundant corpus of graffiti as evidence for the presence of Near Eastern languages in traditionally Greek territory from 900-700 BCE, so it seems possible that Hittites could have also come to Greece.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Serge Frolov and Allen Wright, "Homeric and Ancient Near Eastern Intertextuality in 1 Samuel 17," *JBL* 130/3 (2011): 461-62.

18. Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 19.

19. Bryce, "The Trojan War," 260.

20. Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis*, 27.

One problem with connecting the Hittites and the Greeks is a matter of literacy. We have copies of letters to the Greeks written on clay tablets in Hittite cuneiform from the Hittite heartland, demonstrating their relationship with the neighboring territory. However, no originals of these letters have survived in Greece. The likely reason for this is that these letters may have been written for ambassadors who would read them to Greek officials, who were likely illiterate.<sup>21</sup>

This leads to a question that is crucial to our understanding of the connections between the Near East and Greece and the transmission of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. If *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, or any Hittite writing of significance besides correspondence, actually made it to Greece, why have none of these writings survived? The answer to this question comes down to a discussion of how texts are transmitted in different cultures. In the ancient Near East, there is enough evidence for literature being written down on papyrus and clay tablets that it seems clear that writing down a text was the preferred mode of preserving it during certain periods. However, the habit of actually writing down literature comes late to ancient Greece, and it seems likely that an oral version of the epic could have made it to Greece in early times, taken there by the remnants of the Hittites as they fled their homeland. But once in a culture that was largely illiterate, nobody would have made copies of this into Greek, and the text would have been passed from a written version coming from a written tradition to an oral version in the Greek oral tradition. With this in mind, one would actually expect not to find any copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Greece, even if the story were there in an oral form.

### *Cultural Availability*

Cultural availability is a criterion that is somewhat difficult to define. It is difficult to rank how close two cultures are to each other and how much one culture can understand another. However, literary connections between one culture and the next are easier to define, so I will explore cultural availability through the lens of literary borrowing, especially since literary borrowing is what is being discussed in this piece. If Greek literature borrows elements from Near Eastern literature on a somewhat regular basis, then it seems likely that their cultures are similar, perhaps similar enough that Homer could reasonably use elements from an ancient Near Eastern text as part of his works. Examples of such borrowing are actually visible in the corpus of ancient Greek literature.

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21. Bryce, "The Trojan War," 261.

One significant example is the relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Heracles legends. Gilgamesh and Heracles are both partially divine, they both wear lion skins, they are both exceptional hunters, both are portrayed as being wanderers. Heracles wrestles with Zeus but neither one prevails, just as Gilgamesh and Enkidu do. Heracles wrestles the Marathon bull, Gilgamesh kills the Bull of Heaven, and both take their horns away as a trophy. They both do battle with lions in connection with descending into a deep cave in a high mountain which they both reach with the help of the sun-god. Gilgamesh must fight Humbaba, who guards a sacred tree, just as Heracles defeats Atlas and seizes the fruit of the sacred tree which he guards. Heracles gets the apples of Hera after fighting the dragon Ladon, just as Gilgamesh secures the plant of life from the deep sea; just as Heracles is forced to surrender the precious fruit on his return, so Gilgamesh loses the plant of life to a serpent.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Chronological Availability*

The final aspect of availability is chronological availability, which means that *Gilgamesh* must be available during the time of Homer. Because, as I stated above, the Greek tradition is an oral tradition, no evidence of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* would be available in physical copies from the time of Homer in Greece. However, if *The Epic of Gilgamesh* remained popular in its written form in the Near East, one could assume that the oral version would remain popular in Greece, and such seems to be the case. Outside of Greece, *Gilgamesh* remained popular through the time of Homer. In fact, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Assyria, copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* have been found that prove the epic managed to retain its popularity in certain areas for a significant amount of time, even past the time of Homer.<sup>23</sup> It may be reasonable to suppose that if *Gilgamesh* remained popular in the Near East for a significant period of time, based on the archeological evidence, that the oral version in Greece would also have remained popular.

#### *Analogy*

The next main criterion that must be discussed is the criterion of analogy. If motifs from ancient Near Eastern literature appear in the *Iliad*, particularly if those motifs seem to be taken from *Gilgamesh*, then it would be more likely to find the same thing in *The Odyssey*. One example of this comes from the relationship between the *Iliad* and Sennacherib's account of the Battle

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22. Burr C. Brundage, "Herakles the Levantine: A Comprehensive View," *JNES* 17/4 (1958): 227–28.

23. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 2.



of Halule, an ancient Assyrian text from 691 BCE. In Sennacherib's annals, there is a significant chariot-riding scene in which the king rides his chariot through the ranks of his enemies, "My prancing steeds, harnessed for riding, plunged into the streams of blood as into a river; the wheels of my chariot, which brings down the wicked and the evil, were bespattered with blood and filth." This scene is very similar to a scene in the *Iliad*, where Achilles does almost the same thing, "Thus under great-hearted Achilles his single-hoofed horses stepped on corpses and shields alike: with blood the whole axle was bespattered, and the rails around the seat, which the drops from the hoofs of the horse were hitting."<sup>24</sup> Thus it seems likely that borrowing is taking place in this case. However, there is an example which is even more illuminating, also found in the *Iliad*.

In book five of the *Iliad*, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is wounded on the battlefield by Diomedes. Aphrodite then retreats to Olympus and complains to her mother and father about her treatment at the hand of a mortal. Dione comforts her, but Zeus, the sky god, tells her that it was largely her fault for trying to fight when she has had no experience in doing so. This is remarkably similar to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. After Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, Ishtar, the goddess of love, tries to seduce him, but Gilgamesh snubs her and catalogues all of the lovers whom she has rejected in the past, implying that he would end up like they had. Ishtar then goes to Anu and Antum to complain about her treatment at the hands of Gilgamesh, and Anu, the sky-god, tells her it was largely her fault for provoking Gilgamesh.<sup>25</sup> Despite a few differences, the parallels here are almost unmistakable. It seems likely, based on this, that Homer was familiar with ancient Near Eastern texts, including *Gilgamesh*, and used them in the *Iliad*.

### *Density*

There are a number of occasions where *The Odyssey* seems to draw from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, such that it seems possible that Homer may have taken the overall structure of *The Odyssey* from *Gilgamesh*. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* begins with an invocation of a third party to remember and recite what is about to be read.<sup>26</sup> *The Odyssey* similarly begins with an invocation of the muse, a third party who is supposed to be able to help Homer recite the story.<sup>27</sup> *The*

24. Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis*, 27.

25. *Ibid.*, 41.

26. All references to *Gilgamesh* follow the translation of Stephen Mitchell, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 69–70.

27. All references to *The Odyssey* follow the translation of Robert Fagles and Bernard Knox, *The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 77.

*Epic of Gilgamesh* then goes on to introduce Enkidu, Gilgamesh's partner, who will eventually fight by his side.<sup>28</sup> The same is true of *The Odyssey*, where Telemachus is introduced shortly after the introduction, and he will also fight alongside Odysseus.<sup>29</sup> Shortly after the introduction, *Gilgamesh* discusses Enkidu and his sexual amours with Shamhat, which is what begins to move the plot along, because without this event, Enkidu likely would never have encountered Gilgamesh.<sup>30</sup> Similarly it is Calypso's desire for a sexual relationship with Odysseus that prompts her to spare him when he is shipwrecked, and it is this which finally allows the plot to continue along in *The Odyssey*.<sup>31</sup>

Another similarity is the description of the Cyclops compared to the description of Humbaba. Both are described as giants who eat humans, no one ever returns from their lairs, and in both cases their relish for entrails is specifically noted. The gods are upset about the death of Humbaba in *Gilgamesh*, but they choose not to respond. The same is true in *The Odyssey*. Poseidon is angry at Odysseus, but Zeus does not permit him to do Odysseus any harm. In *Gilgamesh*, Ishtar then seems to be somewhat impressed by Gilgamesh's feat in killing Humbaba, as it is after this event that she chooses to seduce Gilgamesh. When Gilgamesh spurns her, Ishtar decides to send down the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This attempt is unsuccessful, however, as the heroes kill the Bull of Heaven. It is after this that the gods curse the pair, and kill Enkidu. Similarly, in *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus' companions kill the cattle of the sun the gods kill them in retaliation. It may be significant that in both texts, it is the death of divine livestock that calls down the wrath of the gods. The relationship here seems unlikely to be coincidental.

In both texts the heroes also have periods of wandering. Gilgamesh wanders through the world and meets many people, as Odysseus does. There is also a sense in which Gilgamesh descends into the underworld. Gilgamesh goes down into the roots of the mountains, where the sun goes to die, and the text specifically says that the mountain reaches into the underworld. Odysseus also has a descent into the underworld, during which he encounters his friend who has died. There are enough similarities like these that it seems possible that Homer is taking the overall order of his text from *Gilgamesh*.

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28. Mitchell, *Gilgamesh*, 74–81.

29. Fagles and Knox, *The Odyssey*, 81–88.

30. Mitchell, *Gilgamesh*, 78–79.

31. Fagles and Knox, *The Odyssey*, 156.

*Order*

Below is a chart of the order of some of the similarities which I noted above.

The Epic of Gilgamesh	The Odyssey
3 <sup>rd</sup> Party Invoked	Muse Invoked
Enkidu Discussed	Telemachus Discussed
Enkidu's Encounter with Shamhat	Odysseus' Encounter with Calypso
Gilgamesh Kills Humbaba	Odysseus Blinds the Cyclops
Gilgamesh and Enkidu Kill the Bull of Heaven	Odysseus' Men Kill the Cattle of the Sun
Enkidu Dies in Retaliaton for Bull of Heaven	Odysseus' Men Die Due to Cattle of the Sun
Gilgamesh Wanders	Odysseus Wanders
Gilgamesh Descends into Underworld	Odysseus Descends into Underworld
Gilgamesh Returns Home	Odysseus Returns Home

Although there are certainly differences in order (the second half of *The Odyssey* seems to be basically unconnected to *Gilgamesh*), the order of these corresponding elements may indicate that much of the format of the first half of *The Odyssey* was taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

*Interpretability*

One final element is interpretability, which is the ability of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to make sense of *The Odyssey*. If *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can help to inform *The Odyssey*, then textual comparison likely had taken place. This also seems to be the case, as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can help to explain one of the most important elements of *The Odyssey*.

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus spends half the epic trying to return home to Ithaca. When the reader first meets Odysseus, he is weeping on a beach on the island where Calypso, a goddess lives. Odysseus is shipwrecked on the island, where Calypso states that she “welcomed him warmly, cherished him, even vowed to make the man immortal, ageless, all his days.” Yet Odysseus “wept for his foiled journey home.”<sup>32</sup> Getting home seems to be all-consuming for

32. Fagles and Knox, *The Odyssey*, 187.

him. Odysseus' attitude may be a comment on a significant scene in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh travels through the world after Enkidu dies, trying to find eternal life. He is unable to attain the eternal life he seeks and eventually in his travels he encounters a barkeeper named Shiduri, who tries to convince him to go back home:

Gilgamesh, where are you roaming? You will never find the eternal life that you seek. When the gods created mankind, they also created death, and they held back eternal life for themselves alone. Humans are born, they lie, then they die, this is the order the gods have decreed. But until the end comes, enjoy your life, spend it in happiness, not despair. Savor your food, make each of your days a delight, bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean, let music and dancing fill your house, love the child who holds you by the hand, and give your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live.<sup>33</sup>

Gilgamesh struggles to find eternal life and is told that it is better to “love the child who holds you by the hand and give your wife pleasure in your embrace.” Odysseus on the other hand is offered eternal life, yet rejects it. Gilgamesh travels far and wide in a quest for eternal life and never achieves it. Odysseus wants to love the child who used to hold him by the hand and give his wife pleasure in his embrace. When he returns home to Ithaca, this is the most important thing to him—to return the honor of his wife and child who have been disgraced for so long by the suitors. There are other Greek heroes who specifically leave their homes in search of adventure or gold, as in the *Iliad*, so it seems out of place that Odysseus would be willing to give up immortality in order to return to his family. However, in light of *Gilgamesh*, Odysseus' desire to return home makes sense.

## Conclusion

It seems reasonable, based on the evidence, that it would not only be possible for Homer to have been familiar with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but it is likely that he used the epic as his model for the first half of *The Odyssey*. He draws on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* throughout the work, and such intertextuality can explain Odysseus' constant search for him home in Ithaca, which might be difficult to understand otherwise.

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33. Mitchell, *Gilgamesh*, 168–69.