

The Meeting Place of the Divine Council¹

In broad terms of ancient near eastern mythology, the divine council was considered to meet on a "cosmic mountain," that place where the gods lived, where heaven and earth intersected, divine decrees were given, kingship was exercised, and from which the cosmic waters of fertility flowed. At some point in the development of ancient near eastern religion, including those of the west semitic variety, the temple also became a cosmic center.

In Ugaritic mythology, El and his council met to govern the cosmos at the "sources of the two rivers," in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep," located on the cosmic mountain associated with both physical and mythical peaks to the north of Ugarit. El's mountainous meeting place was also designated "the place of the assembled congregation." Baal's sacred mountain, Mount Tsaphan, was also a focal point of Ugaritic cosmic geography, as indicated by the characterization of a list of deities as "the gods of Tsaphan," and a reference to the cultic "feasts of Tsaphan." Baal's mountain is also called a "pleasant place" which is "garden language" used in biblical texts of Eden and Edenic locations.

In connection with convening on the cosmic mountain at the crossroads of heaven and earth, El and his council issued divine decrees from the "tents of El" and the "domed tent" of El. At least one text also presents the divine mountain in parallel with the divine tent. That El would be described as living in a tent is no surprise, for in the Keret Epic, the gods live in "tents" and "tabernacles." Other important vocabulary for El's dwelling at Ugarit include "house" and "temple." El is at times alone in these places, and the gods come to his abode to seek various decisions and permissions, while at other times he is pictured with his assembly.

Most of the above vocabulary is also used in the Hebrew Bible. The location of the cosmic centered migrated in the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the garden of Eden, then moving to Mount Sinai, and then on to Mount Zion. The cosmic center was also, in some sense, even more fluid, since it was apparently considered to be located wherever God was active. The most familiar example would be the theophany associated with the regular movement of the Tabernacle / Tent of Meeting, but the "stairway to heaven" in Jacob's dream of Genesis 28 must also be included. Jacob refers to the location where he saw the מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים ("angels of Elohim / God") ascending and descending on the divine stairway as the "house of God" and the "gate of heaven" (28:16-17), and summarily names the place בֵּית־אֵל ("Beth-El; "house of El"). The association of Bethel with the activity of God and various members of his divine council is confirmed in Genesis 35. Bethel was apparently the place where the divine council held court, for not only did Jacob see Yahweh at the top of the stairway

¹ The fullest treatments of this subject occurs in E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council*, 128-74, and Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, 34-176.

(28:17; 35:9) and the messenger מַלְאָכִים (mal'akim) going about their business (28:12), but Genesis 35:7 (note the plural verb) tells us that the plural אֱלֹהִים (elohim) of the council appeared to him also.

All of these cosmic centers where Israel's God was considered to dwell, issue decrees, and reign in kingship share the same descriptive vocabulary noted above. For example, Yahweh's sanctuary is on a mountain, Mount Zion (Psa. 48:1-2) which is located in the "heights of the north (Hebrew, Tsaphon)," the יַרְכַתֵי צַפּוֹן (*yarkete Tsaphon*, "heights of the north") or on a "very high mountain" (Eze. 40:2). The "height of Zion" is referred to as a "well-watered garden" (Jer. 31:12; Isa. 33:20-22). The mountain of Yahweh is also called the הַר מוֹעֵד (har mō'ed; "mount of assembly"), again located יַרְכַתֵי צַפּוֹן (*yarkete Tsaphon*, "heights of the north"; Isa. 14:13). Within the confines of divine assembly's meeting place in Israelite religion, one finds that the council head sits on a throne that is connected to Zion.² Yahweh's "mount of inheritance" is the home of his throne (Exodus 15:16-18), which is guarded by שֶׁרָפִים (*seraphim*; Isa. 6) and כְּרוּבִים (*cherubim*; Ezekiel 1,10).³ The language is quite similar to the dwellings of the Canaanite gods Mot and Kothar, which are each referred to as "the throne where he sits, the land of his heritage."⁴

A tradition preserved in Ezekiel 28:13-16 equates the "mountain of God" with Eden, the "garden of God," thereby linking the cosmic imagery used for the cosmic mountains of El and Baal at Ugarit. The description of Eden in Genesis 2:6-15 makes use of ancient near eastern cosmic mountain motifs. The presence of the "ground flow" (עַד; 'ed) that "watered the entire face of the earth" and the four headstreams that derived from the ground flow and "the river" flowing out of Eden have all been considered by scholars as parallel to the paradise language of the watery dwelling place of El.⁵ Ezekiel 47:1-12, Zechariah 14:8, and Joel 3:18 (Hebrew, 4:18) all describe the "fertilizing waters" flowing from the temple of God in Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the divine mountain. All of these references to Mount Zion are rooted in the tradition of a sacred mountain in the north, Tsaphan of Syria. Additionally, just as the cosmic paradise of Eden is linked to Zion by the prophets, Mount Sinai, the "mountain of God" (e.g., Exo. 3:1; 4:27), served as

² See Isa. 6:1; 8:18; Jer. 3:17; 14:21; 17:12; Psa. 9:12; Ezek. 1:26.

³ See Ezek. 10:1-22; 11:22; cf. Psa. 18:11. See also Clifford, "Tent of Meeting," 207. Mullen argues that the winged creatures/seraphim are council members, and in his book he notes that such fiery (cf. the root שֶׁרַף for the seraphim) messengers are mere emissaries to the council at Ugarit (140). The major study in regard to the hierarchy of divine beings is that of Lowell Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven*. Handy argues that the seraphim at Ugarit and in the Hebrew Bible are only messenger "gods" (a term appropriate only for a polytheistic context), had no independent personal volition, were clearly a sub-class (even in Jewish tradition), and were most likely the "security guards" of the heavenly throne room where the council met (151-56). They are thus only servants of the council membership and its head, not members. My own position is that the whole heavenly host constitutes the divine council (cf. I Kings 22:19) but that there was a strict hierarchical arrangement within the council.

⁴ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 81, 90-91.

⁵ For the two rivers of El's mountain and the four waterways of Genesis 2, see Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 99-102.

the cosmic center prior to the construction of the Tabernacle and the Temple. Yahweh came upon a "chariot of cloud (‘anan)" at Sinai, a familiar motif associated with God at Sinai and then also his presence at the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, and the Temple.⁶ At Ugarit ‘anan was a divine messenger, not just a vaporous cloud." In Habakkuk 3, one of the so-called "march from the South" passages concerning Yahweh's geographical origins, Yahweh marches to Sinai with his heavenly retinue, which, as has already been noted, contains the names of other deities.

Sinai was also the place where Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel saw God and feasted with him (Exodus 24). The description of this banquet includes the observation that under God's feet was a paved construction of "sapphire stone" (likely lapis lazuli), "like the heavens for clearness." In Baal's palace in Tsaphan, there were also paved bricks that made Baal's house "a house of the clearness of lapis lazuli." Most often Sinai is the place from which divine decrees are issued. Ugaritic El often dispenses his decrees with his assembly present. Yahweh likewise gives the law to Israel at Sinai in the presence of his heavenly host (Deut. 33:1-2; Psalm 68:15-17 [Hebrew 16-18]).

The "domed tent" of El at Ugarit evokes the imagery of the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle.⁷ Moses is told to construct the Tabernacle and its equipment according to the pattern shown him on the holy mountain by God (Exodus 26:30; cf. 25:9,40). The Tabernacle on earth is to be a copy of the heavenly tent in accord with the religious principle of "as in heaven, so on earth." As Clifford notes, "the similarity in form between the earthly dwelling of the god and its heavenly prototype brings about the presence of the deity."⁸

Israel's tent is the counterpart of the divine "houses" on the well-watered mountain dwelling of El and the meeting place of the divine council. As noted previously, in the Keret Epic, the gods and "the circle [pantheon] of El" lived in "tents" and "tabernacles." El issued his decrees from his tent, as the tent of Israel was the place God dispensed oracles for his people (Exodus 33:7-11; Numbers 11:16-30). In Israel the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle were overshadowed by a cloud, which scholars take as a demythologization of a divine messenger (whose name was "Cloud") to the gods in council at Ugarit. In addition, Israel's tabernacle had a court, the *chatsir*. Baal's house had a *chatsir* as well, but Baal coveted the temple that other gods had. The above tent motifs are also transferred to Mount Zion. According to Psalm 76:2-3 and other texts, Yahweh's tent-dwelling is on Zion.⁹ Moreover, Zion is Yahweh's "tent" in Isaiah 33:20 and other passages.¹⁰

⁶ Exo. 19:9. See Exo. 19:16; 24:15ff.; 40:34-38; Num. 9:15ff; 10:11; 12:5ff.; ; Deut. 5:22; 31:15; 1 Kings 8; Isa. 4:5.

⁷ Richard J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 221-27.

⁸ Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 123.

⁹ For the terminology and its meaning, see Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 151. See I Sam. 2:29ff.; Psa. 26:8.

¹⁰ E.g., Psa. 26:8; 74:7; I Chron. 9:23.

