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Divine Assembly

16:16-18). Surprisingly, the girl makes a favorable announcement about Paul and associates: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation”. (16:17; compare Luke 1:76-77; 3:4-5). However, her repetition of this utterance “for many days” irks Paul to the point that he exorcises the pythian spirit from her. In turn, the slave girl’s employers violently drag Paul to court, suing him for damaging their business and “disturbing our city” (Acts 16:19-21). See ENDOR, MEDIUM OF; EPHOD; PROPHET; PROPHECY; SOOTHSAYER.


F. SCOTT SPENCER

DIVINE ASSEMBLY. In the ANE, a common metaphor for describing the world of the divine was the "divine assembly" or "divine council." These descriptions of gods and goddesses gathered together under the leadership of a senior deity were derived, in all probability, from the activities of the royal court. The OT provides a number of descriptions of this heavenly assembly that closely resemble descriptions in the literature of the surrounding cultures (see GODS, GODDESSES).

The concept of a divine assembly is attested in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Phoenicia, and Israel. Ancient Egyptian literature reveals the existence of a "synod of the gods," though it did not play an important role in the religion. Some of our most complete descriptions of the activities of the divine assembly are found in the literature from Mesopotamia. Their "assembly of the gods," headed by the high god Anu, would meet to address various concerns, though a major activity of the assembly seems to have been feasting. It seems to have been composed of all of the major active gods and goddesses, fifty of whom were designated as "the gods of the fates" that they were in charge of determining. Even the active gods of the pantheon were subject to decisions of the assembly.

Similar descriptions of the divine assembly are found in the Canaanite texts from Ras Shamra (see URGARIT, TEXTS AND LITERATURE). We find the "assembly of El/the gods" meeting under the leadership of the senior deity El. The exact membership of the Canaanite assembly, however, is not as clear as it is in the case of Mesopotamia. Indeed, it would seem that there were several different divine assemblies: an "assembly of the gods" and "the assembly of the sons of El." There are also references in these materials to "the assembly of Baal" and to "the assembly of the stars," among others, suggesting possible assemblages of other deities. In the "assembly of El/the gods" it is clear that it is El who issues decrees affecting both divine and human realms.

The OT descriptions of the "divine assembly" all suggest that this metaphor for the organization of the divine world was consistent with that of Mesopotamia and Canaan. One difference, however, should be noted. In the OT, the identities of the members of the assembly are far more obscure than those found in other descriptions of these groups, as in their polytheistic environment Israelite writers sought to express both the uniqueness and the superiority of their God Yahweh. A brief consideration of the major descriptions of the council will demonstrate these similarities and differences.

Two prophetic texts present visions of the heavenly assembly. The first is the vision of Micah (1 Kgs 22:19-23). Micaiah describes his vision of Yahweh, seated on his heavenly throne, surrounded by the "host of heaven" (see HOSTS, HOST OF HEAVEN). Yahweh challenges this "host" with a task, which they debate, until one of them, a "spirit," volunteers to fulfill the challenge. Upon hearing the plan, Yahweh commissions the "spirit" to proceed, assuring its success. Isaiah 6:1-9 provides the account of Isaiah's vision of Yahweh in the heavenly assembly. Isaiah has his vision in the Temple, where Yahweh appears enthroned, accompanied by creatures designated as "seraphim" (see SERAPH, SERAPHS), who are praising Yahweh (see Ps 29:1-2). After having been purified by one of these creatures, Isaiah hears Yahweh's challenge to his retinue. Isaiah himself volunteers and receives Yahweh's commission. The prophet, it would seem, could be understood as the messenger of the heavenly assembly who brought Yahweh's proclamations to the human realm (see Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7; Hag 1:13; Mal 3:1).

Another view of the divine assembly is presented in Job 1-2, when "the sons of god" (bene ha'elohim תִּהְוָא הַעֲלוֹהִים) are introduced to Job, but not to kill him. "The adversary" (hassatan סָאָטָן), as indicated by the consistent use of the term with the definite article (see Zech 3), Only "the adversary," whose role it was to patrol the earth, is active among the members of Yahweh's council. In both meetings of the council, Yahweh gives "the adversary" the power to test Job, but not to kill him. "The adversary" develops into a demonic figure opposed to Yahweh late in the biblical period.

Yahweh's power over the members of the assembly is illustrated in Ps 82. Here Yahweh takes his place in the "assembly of El" (adna'h-'el אָדְנָה-'אֵל; NRSV "divine council"), in the midst of the other gods, and passes judgment on the members of the council, designated as "gods" (elohim), "sons of Elyon" (Hebrew,
A considerable body of 20th cent. scholarship, therefore, held that the “divine man” concept began to influence early Christians’ portrayal of Jesus as soon as there was a significant influx of Hellenistic Jews into the church. One result was that Jesus’ miracles were disengaged from his proclamation of the kingdom of God and were narrated in such a way to emphasize the divine power that they disclosed. Some scholars argued that tales of Jesus’ miracles were collected into written catenae, or “chains,” which were later incorporated into the Gospel of Mark. Moreover, in some of these miracle stories and traditions, belief in Jesus’ divine nature seems to express itself (e.g., in Mark 6:45-52 Jesus’ walk across the sea reads like an epiphany of Yahweh).

The “divine man” hypothesis has influenced NT scholarship in two other ways. One pertains to the question of the gospel genre. A collateral aspect of the “divine man” hypothesis has been the notion that written propaganda for a “divine man,” which would include a recitation of his supernatural feats, took the form of a glorifying narrative, or retalogy. Thus, some have argued that the Gospels, especially Mark, are essentially retalogies for Jesus, the “divine man.” On a different front, D. Georgi attempted to illumine the activities of the Jewish-Christian opponents of Paul in 2 Cor 10–13 by positing that they understood themselves to be divine men.

Recent NT study has raised serious questions about the relevance of the “divine man” concept to the NT. Although some scholars continue to defend the existence of the type in the Greco-Roman world and utilize it to elucidate the origin and meaning of the christology of the Gospels, as well as the form of the Gospels themselves, most either doubt the existence of “divine man” type in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world and argue for various reasons that this conception is not a useful analytic tool for studying early Christianity and its literature.


DIVINE NAME. See GOD, NAMES OF.

DIVINE PRESENCE. There is no abstraction in the biblical languages that exactly corresponds to the English word presence. The term most often translated by...