

## **Old Testament Angelology and the African Understanding of the Spirit World: Exploring the Forms, Motifs and Descriptions**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*The article, employing an exegetical and comparative method, investigates the nature of Old Testament angelology particularly in the enigmatic form of a 'Divine Council' of Yahweh as presented in the description of Old Testament angelology and the 'mild divine monarchy' in the traditional African understanding of the spirit world. Through exegetical means, the first part of the article stresses the theological significance of the form, motif and the general description of the 'Divine Council' in 2 Kings 22:1-23; Job 1-2 and Psalms 82. The second part of the paper highlights the presence of a 'flexible divine monarchy' in traditional African worldview as underscored in the theological studies of African cosmology in the writings of Idowu, Parrinder, Mbiti and Bediako. From this framework, the study argues that the description of Israel's spiritual realm in the form of 'Divine Council' bears some similarities to the dominant portrayal of the African spirit world, particularly in the 'flexible monarchical' description of the African spirit world. The paper explores this basic hypothesis, but also stresses the differences between the two categories under study. For the study, the obvious difference between the two categories lies in the polytheistic nature of African spirit world and the monotheistic description of Old Testament angelology whereby subsidiary elements (whether gods or angels) are subsumed under the authority of Yahweh. Even though such inclination was strongly entertained in traditional African society, however, during the evolution of African traditional religion, the 'gods' (or intermediaries) did not properly evolve into a wholly monotheistic description. Consequently, these intermediaries neither stayed as refractions of the supreme deity, nor angels of the Supreme God, as with Yahweh in the Old Testament, but instead they became gods in themselves, because these intermediaries requested or required cultic worship, ritual and exigencies that are foreign and inadequate in the description and understanding of the angelic intermediaries of the Old Testament.*

## A INTRODUCTION

With the Enlightenment's scientific probing and attack launched against supernaturalism came the demise of the subject of angelology or other categories that bordered on supernaturalism.<sup>1</sup> Even though the discourse on God generally continued, the subject of angels was not included in the discussion. Thus, this subject became seemingly outdated and a residue of medieval superstitions.<sup>2</sup> To counteract this neglect, systematic writings sought to re-impose on the subject of supernaturalism the auxiliary theme of angels.<sup>3</sup> The characteristic of this systematic redress is often a wooden presentation of the biblical teachings surrounding angels which normally made them the subject of academic curiosity rather than a convincing reality.<sup>4</sup> Such a development also affected the general attitudes of even conservatives. Osadolor Imasogie (1993:52) observed that the Christian worldview becomes 'a quasi-scientific worldview'. Within Western Christianity such a worldview and its attitude to angelology, 'could still talk about God, heaven, angels, Satan, Holy Spirit, evil forces; but these were no more than cultural clichés that lacked the existential dynamism they once had prior to and during the medieval period'.

In the field of Biblical studies, there is the outright denial of their existence by some scholars. Thus, for example, Rudolf Bultmann (1961:3) dismissed the existence of the angelic world and designated such biblical categories as mythological forms, which are merely the product of 'Jewish apocalyptic' and Gnostic mythologies. However, contrary to these academic treatments of the subject of angelology, the modern context is once again captivated with

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<sup>1</sup> There is often a general neglect of supernaturalism or the attendant categories in anthropological and sociological studies, particularly as it relates to the study of primal religions. For a detailed discussion about this deliberate oversight, see Hultkrantz 1983:231-253.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Keck 1998:1f.

<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, precisely in 1908, Gerald Birney Smith (1908:115) spoke on the changing attitude towards angelology in newer systematic textbooks. He noted, 'The formal analyses of the older textbooks have been abandoned. The first problem is to show the relation between religious experience and theological belief ... The older theologies, for example, conscientiously elaborated angelology, just because the Bible made assertions about angels. But in most of the books which we are here considering, no reference is made to angels, save in the way of historical exposition. Thus the framework of the traditional theology is dissolving under the new test.'

<sup>4</sup> In his work, *The Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires (1963:67) decried the loss of the 'Christian mind' within Western Christianity. For Blamires, the foremost characteristic of a 'Christian mind' is its 'Supernatural orientation'.

the subject of angels.<sup>5</sup> Popularly, there is a resurgence of interest in the subject of angelology as expressed in countless fictional books, pseudo-scientific fictional movies and modern arts, which celebrate the existence of the world of angels and other semi-celestial beings.<sup>6</sup> *Hollywood* movies in particular had presented imaginative stories on the reality of angelic personalities or super-human beings. It has fanned public imagination and presented tales of angels falling in love with humans, angelic or superhuman intervention, extraterrestrial beings, alien abduction and fictional stories of angelic or celestial battles of good and evil with angelic and demonic personalities involved.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, some of these fictional plots about angels have successfully won awards and have become bestsellers and blockbusters. It seems the Hollywood industry is booming with exceptional exploration of this modern fascination for the angelic world.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the Nigerian movie industry, *Nollywood*, also often presents or translates the reality of these angelic or demonic beings onto the movie screens,<sup>9</sup> thus exploring the fascination and fears that many Nigerians and Africans have for the angelic world or the world of spirits.<sup>10</sup> From these perspectives, this paper investigates the forms, motifs and descriptions of the African understandings of the spirit world and Old Testament angelology. It presupposes that despite the differences of the two social contexts, however, they share a basic form and motif in their understanding of the spirit world. By the use of 'forms', the paper asks the following questions: How does the Old Testament and the African understand, conceive and portray the spirit world? What are the basic perceptual structures, conceptual portraits and theological arrangements of the spirit world? Thus by investigating such questions, the

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<sup>5</sup> There are medieval descriptions of angels that persisted within popular Christian thought. As late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Milton in his classic, *Paradise Lost*, reveals such angelology in his unorthodox description of angels as having powers to eat and to make love. Cf. West 1953:116-123; Allen 1961:489-490.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Carroll 1981:16-25; Freeland 1999:1f; Harrington 1952:202; Lucano 1988:1f; Twitchell 1985: 1f.

<sup>7</sup> On the presence of religious influences in Hollywood movies, see Smith 2001:191f.

<sup>8</sup> For the description of angelic personalities in movies and books such as *Constantine* by Tilda Swinton, *Archangel Protocol & Fallen Host* by Lyda Morehouse, *His Dark Material* trilogy by Philip Pullman, *Star Trek* by George Lucas see Netwitz, <http://io9.com/344884/science-fiction-angels-who-are-really-aliens-in-disguise> (accessed, 27 February 2008).

<sup>9</sup> On the place of 'pagan vampires' or such supernatural beings in Hausa home movies of Northern Nigeria, see Krings 2005:183-205.

<sup>10</sup> For description of power encounter in Ghana movies, see Meyer 2005:155-181.

quest of this paper is to understand the distinguishing theological cast against which the Old Testament angelology and the African understandings of the spirit world are configured. However, the study is neither a documentation of the different Old Testament angels nor those of African spirits and their functions. Rather, it reveals the structure of Old Testament and African understandings of the spirit world. Consequently, it seeks to describe the framework employed in biblical and African descriptions of God in relationship to the lesser supernatural beings within the constitution of these two spirit worlds. Similarly, by 'motifs' I mean the dominant theme that runs throughout Old Testament angelology or the African conception of the spirit world. By 'descriptions' I mean the presentation of angels or spirits within, respectively, the Old Testament and the African traditional religions. Thus to achieve these stated considerations and objectives, the paper employs exegetical and comparative methodologies.

## **B OLD TESTAMENT ANGELOLOGY: FORMS, MOTIFS AND DESCRIPTIONS**

The Old Testament describes the reality of the unseen worlds of angels, demons and supernatural beings. Significantly, however, Old Testament angelology took the form of a divine assembly or celestial council with Yahweh as king or head of that divine cabinet.<sup>11</sup> The description of the 'Council of Yahweh' occurs in the Bible in Job 1-2, 29:4; 15:7-8, Psalm 82 and 1 Kings 22:1-23.<sup>12</sup> In this form, Yahweh is often depicted as a king and the entire angelic world or other gods and goddesses are described as emissaries or ministers of Yahweh. John H Walton (1990:14) observed, 'In the ancient world, major decisions among the gods were group decisions. Mostly likely a perception modeled after human government of an early period, this view understood the gods as deliberating and governing as an assembly.'

Mullen (1980), L'Heureux (1979) and Handy (1994) in their different studies of this form in Old Testament angelology had traced its origin as derived from the description of the pantheon of Canaanite and Ugaritic sources. However, pioneering works of Robinson (1943), Cross (1953) and Whybray (1971) had favoured the Babylonian sources as directly influencing this de-

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<sup>11</sup> Miller (1968:100-107) has presupposed an underlying presence of the divine council behind the description of war in the prophetic writings.

<sup>12</sup> There are related descriptions of Yahweh in connection to other spiritual entities that had an underlying framework of a divine council. This description could be found in passages such as Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; 6:2; Job 38; 7; Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 6:1-8; 40:3; Jeremiah 23:18; Amos 3:7 and Daniel 7:9-14. For an extensive description of these texts, see Day 2000:22 and Clines 1989:18.

scription of Old Testament angelology. Despite the occurrences of such descriptions within the larger streams of ancient near Eastern societies, however, the affinity in language and form had pointed to Baal mythologies of Canaanites and Ugaritic sources. In these myths, Baal is described as head or king of the 'Council of the gods' (cf. Cross 1973:1f.). Jacobsen (1970: 157-170) had postulated that the use of a divine assembly to describe divine governance as seen in the preceding passages reflects the projection of human institutions on divine government, thus the possibility of a 'primitive democracy' within Mesopotamian kingship. According to Day (2000:22) too, such Canaanite, Ugaritic and Mesopotamian descriptions lie behind the 'Council of Yahweh' in the Bible. He further noted: 'Just as an earthly king is supported by courtiers, so Yahweh has a heavenly court.' However, 'as monotheism became absolute, so these were demoted to the status of angels'. In order to evaluate these claims and to understand the description of the 'divine council' in Old Testament angelology, the study of the three highlighted passages of 1 Kings 22:1-23, Job 1-2, and Psalm 82 is indispensable.

### **1 1 Kings 22:1-23**

The story develops from verses 1 of 1 Kings 22 to 40; however, our present concern is with the description of the divine council in verses 19-23.<sup>13</sup> Gray (1970:451) in his study of the 'Council of Yahweh' in 1 Kings 22:1-18, noted that it is a 'scene in the heavenly court'. In this vision, Yahweh is seen directing 'human affairs from his royal throne'. According to Gray (1970:452), 'the conception probably represents a fusion of the native Israelite idea of Yahweh as Marshal of the host of Israel with that of God as king or governor of the forces of nature...'. Considering exegetical concern, Gesenius (1910:322) observed that the jussive construction *יִפְתָּהּ* ('to persuade' or 'to deceive') when placed after an interrogative sentence as occurs in 1 Kings 22:20 is used to connote 'demand'. Thus, Yahweh is invariably making a 'demand' on the heavenly divine council. While the Masoretic text avoids references to Yahweh of Israel, the Septuagint on the other hand, reads, "God of Israel," and hence stresses the identity of this presiding deity as Yahweh.

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<sup>13</sup> The narrative describes the coalition between Jehoshaphat and Ahab to launch a military campaign on Ramoth-Gilead, but unknown to Ahab, there is a session of 'divine council' in heaven which is seeking for ways to lead him to his death at Ramoth Gilead. Against the false prophecies of his prophets, Micaiah gave away the secrets of this 'divine council' warning him of the outcome of his military operation. Significantly, Micaiah gave the description of the 'divine council' in verses 19-23 revealing an interesting conception of the 'divine council' and hence Old Testament angelology.

Similarly, the Septuagint and the Vulgate have מַלְאֲכַי יִשְׂרָאֵל in verse 20.<sup>14</sup> This designation by the Septuagint and Vulgate places the searchlight of the present divine discussion on Ahab. Significantly, the text also describes the deliberative nature of this assembly. Verse 20b reads וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה בְּכֹה וְזֶה אָמַר בְּכֹה which literally means ‘this one said by thus and that one said by thus’.<sup>15</sup> The other version of the same narrative reads וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה אָמַר כְּכֹה וְזֶה אָמַר כְּכֹה (2 Chr 18:19) which literally means, ‘and he said like this (saying) and the other like that’.<sup>16</sup> The variant descriptions of the same stories preserved the ‘discussions’ taking place in the divine council, hence reiterating the deliberative nature of the discussion in the divine council. The conversational and deliberative process in the divine council is also seen in verses 21-22, where Yahweh is depicted as engaging in a short dialogue with the ‘lying spirit’. The short dialogue between Yahweh and the lying spirit is in search of a *modus operandi* or means of bringing Ahab to his fall at Ramoth Gilead. Thus the text reads,

And the spirit went out, and stood before Yahweh, and said, ‘I will persuade him’; and Yahweh said, to him, ‘By what?’ and he said, ‘I go out, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets’; and He said, ‘you will persuade, and you will prevail, go and do so.’<sup>17</sup>

The conversation or dialogue between Yahweh in the divine council and the ‘lying spirit’ raises, however, some serious ethical-theological problems.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, it casts aspersion on the holy image of Yahweh, since Yahweh is seen here as a ‘deceiver’, and secondly, it reduces Yahweh to a deity that is short-sighted, who lacks the knowledge of contingencies and is thus in need of suggestions from the other members of the divine council. At the heart of this problem is the use of פָּתָה. This word is used in Jeremiah 20:7-9 to show Yahweh’s ‘deception’ of Jeremiah as translated by the King James Version, the New American Version and even the New International Version (cf. Clines & Gunn 1978:20-23). It is also the word used in the Samson narrative to show how the would-be bride of Samson obtained the answer to the riddle through

<sup>14</sup> The BHS editors gave the Hebrew translation or equivalent of the Septuagint and Vulgate renderings.

<sup>15</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>16</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>17</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>18</sup> While this passage could be viewed as anthropomorphic in nature, such anthropomorphic considerations did not rule out the theological and ethical questions that this passage raise. For discussion of Old Testament anthropomorphic descriptions of God particularly its value to Old Testament studies, see Yamauchi 1970:220.

deception. Furthermore, it is used in the context of Mosaic legislation to describe the case of sexual seduction (Exod 22:15) and in the book of Proverbs to describe the enticement of a sinner (1:10). In all the occurrences, the idea of פְּתָה is basically negative and hence has to do with the unethical.

However, there are two ways to approach the present problem raised by פְּתָה in this text. Firstly, since the entire Hebrew Bible affirmed the integrity and holiness of Yahweh, it is quite appropriate to translate פְּתָה as ‘persuasion’ rather than ‘deception’ or ‘enticement’ against the suggestion of dominant modern translators. The reason for such a translation comes from the growing understanding that it is the context of a word that best describes its meaning rather than its etymology or derivative root. This consideration in exegesis has been termed the ‘root fallacy.’ Concerning this ‘root fallacy,’ D. A. Carson (1996:28) noted,

One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word *has* a meaning bound up with its shape or its component. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word. All of this is linguistic nonsense.

This observation by Carson makes it clear that the root or etymology of a word often reveals a different meaning from the derivatives of that word within the passage of time or in a unique usage within a given context. Significantly, even though acquiescing to the different shades of the meaning in the categories of פְּתָה as ‘deception’ and ‘enticement’, nonetheless Koehler and Baumgartner (2001:985) noted that in the *pi’el* form of פְּתָה when having a human subject, it is to be translated as ‘to persuade someone’ by ‘offering a tempting allurements’ or ‘with a hypocritical suggestion’. However, when פְּתָה has God as its subject, as is the case in this passage under study, the meaning is either ‘to persuade’, or alternatively ‘to attempt to persuade’. Despite Koehler and Baumgartner’s proposition, however, the context of פְּתָה as used in our text is suggestive of ‘deception’ rather than ‘persuasion’, since there is a reference to רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר or ‘lying spirit’ which is definitely commissioned to deceive Ahab through his prophets. In this understanding, ‘persuasion’ as a translation to פְּתָה did not take into cognisance the presence of רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר. The Targum avoided this problem of רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר by affixing the לְ preposition to רוּחַ, which according to Koehler and Baumgartner (2001:508) might have the meaning of aim and purpose of action, particularly ‘to be turned into’ something. In this perspective, the ‘lying spirit’ might be a spirit who was temporarily turned into a persuasive agent of Yahweh. Thus for the Targum, the spirit was not essentially a lying or an evil spirit, but became one, due to the nature of the assignment given to it. However, whether the spirit is ontologically a lying spirit or is merely conceived as such from the nature of its assignment, the ethical problem of the use of this being

by Yahweh still persists since the connection of Yahweh with such an agent of lying impinges on the holiness of Yahweh. Secondly, we might approach the text by underscoring the sovereignty of Yahweh to use or employ the services of anything by any means to discipline his people or to actualise his divine purposes. This dominant Old Testament thought sees divine sovereign hands as encompassing and embracing every thing to bring about desired plans and purposes. Thus such a divine *modus operandi* is responsible for Habakkuk's dilemma where he could not understand why Yahweh used the wicked Babylonians as a means or instrument for punishing his covenant people.

Concerning the suggestions given by the 'divine council' to Yahweh, we might say this is merely a literary description in which interactive categories, communal structures and royal forms are hereby imposed on the deity in order to show the dignity, majesty and glory of the divine being who has many servants or beings doing his cosmic bidding. Thus Micaiah's description that 'I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on his right hand and on his left' in verse 19 might be an endeavour to describe Yahweh in such terms. Consequently, Yahweh is configured as a king who is surrounded by his court and the members of the divine council are expected to contribute appropriately to such a court's discussion. In a similar context, in Isaiah 6, the prophet is also depicted as contributing to such a divine discussion. However, the idea of outright counselling of Yahweh is rejected since he is omniscient. Thus Isaiah asked, 'Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?' (Is 40:14).

## 2 Job 1-2

The next text, Job chapters 1 and 2, also describes a divine council which primarily consists of the 'Sons of God'. While 1 Kings 22 is about the fate of a king, Job's narrative is about the fate of a rich righteous man. Despite their differences, there lies also a similarity, namely that both divine councils are pre-occupied with determining the fate of individuals on earth. In his study of the 'Council of Yahweh' in Job, Clines (1989:18) observed,

It is an assembly of the heavenly council, God being pictured as a king surrounded by his courtiers, other heavenly beings neither human nor divine in the full sense, but "sons of God", their being derivative from his, and their rank superhuman. The concept of the royal council in which the king would be surrounded by his courtiers receiving reports from them, taking counsel with them, and giving directives to them, is familiar especially from Egypt...and may be assumed equally for Israel. The common royal practice was naturally ascribed to God also, to what extent as a fictive device and to what as a matter of serious belief is hard to determine.



However, he (Clines 1989:19) that in the ‘framework of a monotheistic religion’, the mythological description of consort for the deity as ascribed to Baal ‘could not be imagined’. According to Gesenius (1910:418) בֶּן as used in Job 1:6 and 2:1 is to indicate a genitive relationship. This genitival relationship describes membership to a ‘guild or society (or of a tribe, or any definite class)’. He further noted, ‘Thus בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים or בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים ... properly means not *sons of the god* (s), but beings of the class of God. Waltke and O’Connor (1990:150) had referred to the genitive function of בֶּן as indicating ‘the relationship of an individual to a class of beings’. In this category, such a relationship is between Yahweh and the divine beings. The narrative shifts from the other members of the ‘Sons of God’, and concentrates on Satan and God. How do we understand וַיָּבֹא גַם־הַשָּׂטָן בְּתוֹכָם or literally, ‘and Satan came also among them?’ Is Satan part of the class of the ‘Sons of God’? Or Is Satan’s presence in this assembly an intrusion of the gathering of the ‘Sons of God’? This difficulty has generated the speculation that Satan is part of the divine council acting as the ‘attorney of the heavenly council’. ‘If this view is correct’, noted Hartley (1991:72) ‘his task on earth was to discover human sins and failures and to bring his findings before the heavenly assembly’. But his role in this scene of Job ‘deviates from this explanation. Instead of uncovering disruptive plans, he acts as a troublemaker, a disturber of the kingdom’. Similarly, some had reasoned that Satan is an intrusion to the heavenly court, since his role in the narrative is primarily negative. However, such understanding often imposes on the text the later Jewish-Christian description of Satan as a pure diabolic entity. The nominal phrase גַּם־הַשָּׂטָן בְּתוֹכָם in my judgment, reveals both the distinction and the inclusion of Satan within the ‘Sons of God’ since the preposition תוֹךְ might also indicate inclusion or distinction of the entity mentioned.<sup>19</sup> Considering such attention on Satan, it might likely presuppose a role within the divine council, as Delitzsch (1978:54) observed, ‘It is an assembly day in heaven. All the spirits present themselves to render their account, and expecting to receive commands; and the... dialogue ensues between Yahweh and Satan.’ Even though he relativised the deliberative nature of the meeting, nevertheless, Delitzsch’s attribution of a role to Satan in the divine council is quite appropriate.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the discourse between God and Satan expresses both the

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<sup>19</sup> תוֹךְ is used in Genesis 23:10, 40:20 and 2 Kings 4:13 to show inclusion or membership of the entity described to a particular group. Cf. Clines 1989:19.

<sup>20</sup> Following trends in background studies of this passage, Hartley suggested a Persian background to the development of the concept of Satan. He noted, ‘The Persian emperor had secret servants who toured the realm at random to discern the

limitation of Satan and the sovereignty of God. On the other hand, it also reveals the liberty of Satan in the divine council since his opinions and suggestions were followed. In all the two discourses (1:6-12; 2:1-8) between him and Yahweh, Satan reveals adequate understanding of the human nature (1:9-11; 2:4-5). Moreover he advocates for a point of view which is directly opposite to that of Yahweh. However, defining the sovereignty of Yahweh within such a description of the 'Council of Yahweh' in Job, Anderson (1976:81) reasoned,

Since in Israel only the Lord received divine honours, His supremacy is never in doubt. He presided over the meeting like a king on his throne. The angel courtiers are seen surrounding Him... The incomparable Lord has no colleagues; His attendants are shadows, scarcely persons. Even the pre-eminent "angel of the Lord" remains a nameless functionary. Only later do Michael and Gabriel emerge with something like individuality. So minor is their role, so completely dominated by the incontestable sovereignty of the Lord, that no ideas of polytheism are present, even when they are called (children of) gods.

Thus Yahweh's sovereignty was underscored even though liberty was given to the members of the 'divine council'. In this perspective, 'divine council' in Job 1-2 reveals liberty and the possibility of the members of such divine council to take different perceptions on issues from the presiding deity, Yahweh. Consequently, the narrative reveals interesting relationship that exists between Yahweh and the members of the divine council.

### **3 Psalm 82**

The last text, in Psalm 82, presents another description of the divine council. Dahood (1979:268) in his study of Psalm 82 describes this psalm as a vision 'of the heavenly tribunal where God passes judgment on the pagan deities' and thus agrees with Julian Morgenstern (1936) that a mythological core lies behind the description of the council of Yahweh. However, Dahood (1979:268) observed that in the 'final verse' of the Psalm, there is a prayer 'for the restoration of universal justice under the sole rule of Yahweh,' thus pointing to the sovereignty of God within the council of the pagan gods. Significantly, this text speaks of God 'presiding' or 'supervising' the council of the gods. The word עָבַד is used here with the basic understanding of 'supervision' or

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allegiance and behavior of the people and especially of various officials. These agents were called "the eyes and ears of the king"... So in Job the Satan appears as the roving eye of the monarch to report on the loyalty of subjects.' Cf. Hartley 1991:72; Gruenthaner 1944:6-27.

‘overseeing’. It is used in its *niph‘al* form as in Ruth 2:5 to describe the chief foreman that was placed over the workers in the field of Boaz.<sup>21</sup> In its substantive form, it is used in 1 Kings 4:5 and 1 Kings 5:30 and translated as foreman, overseer and governor respectively.

According to Martens (1996:135), ‘in prophetic and poetic material נָצַב is linked with divine authoritative action comparable to an overseer or foreman’. Thus, God presides or oversees ‘the heavenly council, where justice is a critical concern’. Divine quest for justice is seen in his indictment of the council in verses 2-7. The council according to this Psalm has failed to carry out its job description and consequently forfeited its status of being gods; hence even ‘though they are gods yet they will die like men’ (verse 6-7). While different identities of the members of this divine council has been proposed, such as the indictment of Israelite judicial and legal systems, however, the interpretation accepted by the present discussion is to see the indictment of the divine council as the indictment of ‘gods’ or ‘supernatural’ beings who are not fulfilling their duties as emissaries of Yahweh.<sup>22</sup> This interpretation is consistent with the general description of the divine council as reflected in the preceding two passages. According to Emerton (1960:329-32) such supernatural description of this council is sustained in the Targum, Qumran writings, Peshitta and the writings of the Church fathers. Significantly, Jesus understood the identity of the persons described in this passage as angelic, thus a supernatural conception of the divine council is in this sense appropriate.<sup>23</sup>

The central thought of these studies in 1 Kings 22, Job 1-2 and Psalms 82 on the ‘Council of Yahweh’ is the conception that Yahweh is described as a royal personage who is surrounded by other gods or angelic personalities. These angelic personalities or assumed gods are also described as subjected to the sovereign decrees of Yahweh.<sup>24</sup> Within this highest council or assembly dif-

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<sup>21</sup> For the different nuances of נָצַב as it occurs here and נָצַב in the preceding passage of Job 1:6 and 2:1 see Reindl 1998:519.

<sup>22</sup> In Jewish interpretation, different persons have been suggested as being described by this Psalm. Four of the common persons identified are angels, Judges, Melchizedek and Israelites at Sinai. Cf Hanson 1966:363-67.

<sup>23</sup> For the general description of the different scholarly trends in the interpretation of this Psalms particularly in relationship to John 10, see Neyrey 1989:647-663.

<sup>24</sup> David Penchansky (2005:54) interpreted Psalm 82 as ‘an etiology that explains why Israelites worship Yahweh alone’. According to Penchansky, ‘El convenes a meeting of the gods. Yahweh is not the director and chairman of the board, but instead attends the meeting as a member... But the gods or other nations prove unworthy of

ferent angelic beings are constituted, namely Satan, lying spirits, the enigmatic angel of the Lord, Sons of God, and even the prophets who are expected to transmit or convey the commands of Yahweh, the chief presiding king (cf. Cross 1973:186). Despite the distinctiveness of ‘Council of Yahweh’ within this description however, as observed by Miller (2000) the job’s description or task of the council generally remained the same in both Israel and its Ancient Near Eastern environment. Thus he (2000:425) noted: ‘The concerns of the assembly are like that of the divine assembly in Mesopotamian religion: upholding the moral and legal order of society, deciding about victory and defeat in war and politics, electing and deposing kings, controlling and shaping history.’ In this same sense, Kee (2007:259) further noted, ‘In Ancient Near Eastern literature the “heavenly council” represents the most authoritative decision-making agent in the universe and history.’

In the light of our present study, the collective motif of these descriptions of 1 Kings 22, Job 1-2 and Psalm 82 is the overarching immanent construction of the ‘council of Yahweh’ since it described ‘divine council’ in the imagery of human royalties. Within this highly immanent construction is also an unprecedented transcendent assumption whereby Yahweh is placed above the angelic beings and other supernatural entities. Thus, the council of Yahweh reveals both immanent and transcendent motifs, which place God and his plans within the domain of the human language, symbols and even experience. On the other hand, despite its transcendent agenda, Old Testament angelology reveals an overwhelming immanent commitment since it configures the description of Yahweh and supernatural beings in the category of human description and also describes the consistent engagement of the heavenly council in human affairs on earth particularly through the active or passive involvement of the members of the divine council.

### **C THE AFRICAN SPIRIT WORLD: FORMS, MOTIFS AND DESCRIPTIONS**

In a particular sense, Africans have no angelology, if by angelology we mean a catalogue or array of created spirit beings with names and distinctive roles, working in a monotheistic framework. Instead the activities of these spirit beings under traditional African beliefs are often capricious and within the framework of polytheism (cf. Langton 1936:1f.). Thus, Mugambi (1989:66) noted, ‘in the African religious heritage there was no belief in angels’, but spirits. Despite this absence of angelology in African traditional religion, the Old

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their great power and responsibility; they have not been serving as protector of their domain, nor have they promoted justice in their client states. Yahweh accuses them in the public forum and pronounces them dead. This is rare but not unheard of fate for divine beings. They will die like mortals...’

Testament angelology and the African understanding of the spirit world have converging similarities in the conception of the spirit realm in the form of monarchy. The African world of spirit is not ordered in family hierarchies such as the Canaanite pantheon whereby spiritual beings are depicted as father, mother, brother, sisters and cousins (cf. Saggs 1989:1f), nor is African spiritual cosmology configured in terms of a democratic assembly such as the Greek Olympus where decisions are taken basically on the argumentations, cunningness and intrigues of the Greek deities.<sup>25</sup> It is not also configured dominantly in terms of servant and master relationship<sup>26</sup> as the spiritual world of the Hittites,<sup>27</sup> nor is it depicted in the assembly where decisions in the spiritual realms are primarily dominated by the discretion and wisdom of Yahweh alone. To the contrary, while African spiritual cosmology has a degree of affinity to these cosmologies, it differs in many respects. In the African understanding of the world of spirits, the relationships between the spirit beings and the Supreme Being are in the category of a 'monarch and his ministers or emissaries'. The Supreme Being is often depicted in African mythology as a monarch and the other personalities of the pantheon as merely ambassadors, messengers or his representatives. Concerning the relationship of the divinities and the Supreme God, Idowu (1962:57) noted that 'according to the indigenous belief of the Yoruba, these divinities serve the will of *Olòdúmàre* in the creation and theocratic government of the world'. Furthermore, he (2000:62) observed:

According to Yoruba theology, the *orìṣà* were brought forth by *Olòdúmàre*. We do not know by what method they were produced; but the strong suggestion of our oral traditions is that they were either engendered by Him or that they emanated from Him... anyway, they are beings of a higher order than man in consequence of their nature and functions. They have been employed, from the very beginning, in duties connected with the earth and its fullness. Thus, they are the ministers of *Olòdúmàre*, looking after the affairs of His Universe and acting as intermediaries between Him and the world of

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the goddess Minerva (or Athena) argued for the safety of Odysseus' journey back home to the divine council of Olympus. Homer revealed, 'And now, as Dawn rose from her couch beside Tithonus - harbinger of light alike to mortals and immortals - the gods met in council and with them, Jove the lord of thunder, who is their king, Thereon Minerva began to tell them of the many sufferings of Ulysses, for she pitied him away there in the house of the nymph Calypso.' See Homer 1971:208.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Douglas (1968:9), in her study of the Lele of Kasai in Congo, defined the relationship between God and humanity in the category of Master and slaves. She noted, 'Of God, *Njambi*, they say that he has created men and animals, rivers and all things. The relation of God to men is like that of their owner to his slaves. He orders them, protects them, sets their affairs straight, and avenges injustices.'

<sup>27</sup> On the Hittite's cosmology see Gurney 1954:1f.

men. To each of them is assigned a department over which he is ruler and governor.

While Idowu's quest to harmonise the African spirit world has been criticised, however, there is credence to his observation that there is a 'divine bureaucracy' in the traditional descriptions of the African spirits and their relationship to the Supreme God.<sup>28</sup> Such divine administration of the spirit world presupposes a fundamental relationship between the Supreme Being, divinities and the human community. In a similar study of the Yoruba and Ewe people of West Africa, Geoffrey Parrinder (1950:226) noted, 'There is certainly a hierarchy through which God is approached, as an earthly chief is only reached through intermediaries...' Thus, he (1950:226) also observed, 'The religion of Yoruba and Ewe... is presided over by a supreme Creator. The many lesser divinities are often said to be "sons" of God. One is met with this claim when speaking of Christ as the Son of God: "So is our god (*orisha*) a son of Olorūn'". Such a description of the African spirit world as seen in Idowu and Parrinder underscores the basic contention that Africans have a devotion to the supreme God despite their everyday religious involvement with the cult of the lesser gods. Significantly, Mbiti (1980:29) has observed that such monarchical disposition of the African spirit world is a projection of the political structures of the African society on the spirit realm. Mbiti (1980:45) noted, 'African concepts of God are strongly coloured and influenced by the historical, geographical, social and cultural background or environment of each people'. He (1950:226) further observed,

In this capacity, God is regarded as King, Ruler, Lord, Master and Judge. It is generally in societies, which traditionally have or have had kings, chiefs or other central rulers, that we find the most explicit concept of God as King and Ruler. This obviously reflects the political structure of the peoples concerned, though the idea of God's governing work is not confined only to peoples of this political background. The image and work of the human rulers tend to be readily projected on the image of God. Of this we have clear examples from many parts of Africa.

The African spirit world, whether treated as a projection of the African political landscape as conceived by Mbiti or as integral part of the African

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<sup>28</sup> Idowu (1962:57) suggested a 'diffusive monotheism' for the description of the African spirit world, particularly the relationship between God and the lesser beings in African cosmology. Such a quest to impose a wholly monotheistic description and agenda for the African spirit world had necessitated a criticism of Idowu's work, since it did not take into cognizance the distinctive identity of the lesser gods or spirit beings. For the critique of Idowu see Bediako (1994:14-20; 1995: 97).

cosmology as argued by Idowu, the intended end is to sanction a ‘monotheistic’ or ‘semi-monotheistic’ content and form to the African traditional religion. Unfortunately, despite its merits, such a quest to monotheise African traditional religions becomes a disservice to angelology since it treats lightly the prominent positions occupied by the lesser gods in the description of an African understanding of the spirit world. Concerning this flaw, Kwame Bediako (1995:97) noted,

African Christian scholars who have examined the spiritual universe of African primal religions, have to my mind, done less than full justice to the complexity of the African primal world. Keen to show the relationship of continuity between the pre-Christian religions and Christian belief, they have stressed, particularly and rightly so, the continuity of God. This must be reckoned an important achievement by African theology... By stressing the centrality and uniqueness of God in African tradition, African theology has, however, left the wider spirit world of African primal religions- divinities, ancestors, natural forces-unaccounted for.

Arising from such critique, Bediako advocated for the understanding of ‘the unity and multiplicity of the Transcendent’ within African traditional religions. Consequently, Bediako’s definition encourages the exploration of the polytheistic and monotheistic tendencies within the African understanding of the spirit world, thus making room to describe African spirit world in the category of the plurality and singularity of God and the different constitutions of the African spirit world, where the Supreme Being is configured within the activities of the lesser gods.<sup>29</sup> While African academic discourses are seeking to remove the problem of the mediating spirits or lesser deities in the African spiritual world, majority of Africans at the grassroots see a similarity between their traditional understanding of the spirit world and those emphasised by their new faith in Jesus Christ (cf. King 1994:10-26). The familiarity arises from the entrenched understanding of these mediating spirits or divinities who serve as messengers of the Supreme Being. These groups of spirits are conceived to bridge the gap between God and humanity, and they are often shouldered with the task to perpetuate or replicate the will of the Supreme deity among African people. The affinity of the African conception of these supernatural beings and

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<sup>29</sup> Aylward Shorter (1978:57) had observed, ‘Mediation is a familiar concept in Africa which enhances the importance of the one addressed. In many parts of Africa chiefs cannot be addressed directly, but have to be addressed indirectly through spokesmen, or with faces averted, or the mouth covered... God is addressed indirectly in the third person, or he is approached through mediators. These mediators may be spirits, or they may be human beings, chiefs or important men to whom the worship of the supreme is restricted.’

the biblical angelology has greatly influenced the dominance of angelology in the prayers, sermons, cultic and sacramental observances of the African Independent Churches (cf. Oosthuizen 1988:3-22). The phenomenon of African Independent Churches could be seen as a merger of the African and biblical worldviews and thus result in a worldview that is significantly dominated by an emphasis on angels and spirit beings. In traditional African society, the spirits are often depicted in realistic or portrayed in imaginative colourings. Thus, there is the recognition of tall and short spirits, good and bad, ugly and fair spirit beings.

Though most African worldviews are greatly divided on the nature or forms of these spirits, they agree on some general characteristics.<sup>30</sup> Seven defining characteristics of spirits in the traditional African society could be stated here.

First, there is the general acceptance of the existence of these spiritual beings. They are not merely a traditional fictional creation that lack footage in reality, but they are conceived as concrete realities that are presumably perceived to co-inhabit the world of humans. There are endless stories of men and women who attested of seeing and even talking with these spiritual personalities. These spirits, for many African societies, are not a force or energy, but beings with distinctive personalities.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, spirits, according to the traditional ethics of most African societies, are fundamentally divided into two broad camps, namely, good and bad spirits. The cause of the evilness or goodness of some spirits is not always accounted for; however there is a recognition that evil spirits exist to haunt people and good spirits to bless people.<sup>32</sup> Often they are believed to dwell in specified areas or come out at certain specified times of the day.

Thirdly, Africans often perceive the spirits as closely related to the traditional medicine man or cultic leader. The knowledge of the demands or wishes of spirits are investigated through consultation of the diviner or seer. Thus, he or she is the custodian of esoteric knowledge pertaining to the realm

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<sup>30</sup> For a general description of the African thought world, see Sundermeier 1982:36-62.

<sup>31</sup> Describing a typical Hausa conception of the spirit world, Baba of Karo observed, 'There are spirits of the bush animals, there are spirits of the streams, there are spirits of the springs, there are spirits of the rocks, there are spirits of the paths, there are spirits of men inside the town. There are inherited spirits like Dangaladima and Nana and Sarkin Rafi, if one *bori*-dancer dies they follow someone else in his kin.' See Smith 1954:222.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Turaki 1999:1f; Kangdim 1981:17-25; Kowanba 1986:31-36; Yilji 1986:30-39.



feared by most Africans. In this way, he or she is accorded great prestige because of his or her cultic prowess in dealing with the spiritual beings.

Fourthly, African people believe that the spiritual beings could intervene at will into the physical order. The two realms of the spiritual and the physical, terrestrial and the celestial, the seen and unseen, have no defined borders since these spirits are expected to manifest or reveal their presence to the world of humans. There are many African myths about spirits turning into human beings and going to the market or even seeking marriage or partaking in any other human activity.

Fifthly, Africans have always affirmed the extraordinary powers of spiritual beings. They are conceived as embodiment of power which could be used to haunt or bless, thus the need to seek a protective shield against the activities of malevolent spirits and to seek alliance with the good ones.

Sixthly, most Africans understand the mediating roles of spiritual beings as messengers of the Supreme God. There is the acknowledgement of their roles as emissaries of God who are saddled with the task of controlling a certain sphere or other assigned functions. However, such a divine function is often obliterated, as often seen, in the acceptance of sacrifice and other cultic rituals by these spiritual beings. Thus they are not merely a channel or means to God as often argued, but they are also an end in themselves.

Lastly, the majority of Africans maintain the belief that spirits are not subjected to human limitation or restrictions. Thus they could go through walls, live in water, stay in trees, fly through the air, take animal or human forms, dwell in rocks or mountains and even possess people.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the cultural descriptions of these characteristics in stories, folklore and myths are re-occurring motifs in the African conception of the spirit world, thus stressing the immanence of these spiritual beings.

## **D CONCLUSION**

Concerning the significance of the African spirit world to Christianity, Turaki (2001:60) observed that 'traditional African worldview defines what is reality in an African sense and it also has a profound and pervasive influence upon African thought and philosophy'. He (2001:60) further noted, 'This worldview affects how Africans understand and interpret Christianity or any foreign religion or worldview. It also affects how Africans understand and interpret their relationships to others and the world around them.' Thus, 'such an understand-

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<sup>33</sup> For a study of demonology and redemption in the African context, see Ferdinando 1999:1f; Daneel 1992:35-55; Oosthuizen 1988:3-22.

ing is crucial to doing theology in Africa'. This understanding underscores the general importance associated with the African spirit world. This world is so real to Africans, and for them, it is the world that actually exists because the material world derives its essence, form and goals from the manipulation or operations of the spiritual forces from the spirit world. As this study suggests, the spirit world of the Old Testament is configured within the framework of a council and the gods or angelic beings are described as minister of this divine council who are often seen working or deliberating with the presiding God, Yahweh. Similarly, in the African understanding of the spirit world, the divinities are traditionally conceived as messengers or emissaries of God, who are working ultimately for the Supreme God. Consequently, the Supreme God is closely related to the African people through the mediating roles of the divinities. These innumerable divinities are conceived as immanent expression of the High God. In this way, the Old Testament bears some degree of affinity with the African understanding of the spirit world since the Old Testament angelology explores the basic persuasion that Yahweh presides over a divine cabinet with the gods or angelic beings as members, who are primarily concerned with carrying out the will and wishes of the Supreme Being. While the Old Testament angelology explores a monotheistic disposition to accentuate this intention, the African understanding of the spirit world becomes polytheistic and thus fails generally to fit the members of this divine cabinet into a monotheistic description. Unfortunately, it is at this point that African understanding of the spirit world fails to harmonise the unity and multiplicity of the Supreme God by its refusal to pursue further the dominant framework of monotheism, and the elimination of deification and worship attributed to these lesser divinities in traditional African religious systems.

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