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► **To cite this version:**

Corinne Bonnet. Divine Assembly. Allison, Dale C.; Klauck, Hans-Josef; Leppin, Volker. Encyclopedia of the Bible and its reception, 6, De Gruyter, pp.965-966, 2013, Dabbesheth - Dreams and Dream interpretation, 978-3-11-018374-0. hal-02009976

HAL Id: hal-02009976

<https://hal.science/hal-02009976>

Submitted on 20 Feb 2019

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Divine Assembly

- I. Ancient Near East
- II. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

I. Ancient Near East

All ANE religions recognize the concept of an assembly of gods, namely, a pantheon that meets from time to time, especially to make decisions regarding the destinies of individuals (whether divine or human persons) or groups, cities, or even all humanity. This notion is no doubt a projection of the human assemblies presided over by the king. That is, the portrayal of the divine realm is modeled on the human one, though of course with some meaningful differences to accommodate the characterization of superhuman entities.

In Mesopotamia, Syria, and Phoenicia, the gods of a single city or state together constitute a community. The most common designations for such an entity include Akkadian *puḫru*, Ugaritic *phr* or *phr m'd*, and Phoenician and Aramaic *mphrt* or *'dt* – all meaning “assembly, counsel” or “meeting.” In addition, Ugaritic and Phoenician designate the pantheon (also referred to as “all the gods of X”) with *dr*, “circle.” Two important ideas are expressed through this vocabulary: first, it connotes a closed group, that is, an exclusive club or a network; second, it implies that all the deities are involved since each has his or her own rank and function.

Within the assembly, the roles are hierarchically defined and, thus, not a “democratic” setup, as some scholars would have it (Jacobsen: 167). The pantheon is not a chaotic or egalitarian sum of deities but an organic group configured according to affinities and struggles, compatibilities and collaborations. Accordingly, it reflects a logic that is not fixed but rather changes according to contexts and events. The designated supreme deity generally leads the meetings. In the Mesopotamian myths, then, Anu, the god of heaven and father of the gods, or Enlil, the “storm god,” presides over the assembly. Within the Ugaritic texts, El plays this same role. Moreover, the Hittite version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (VII,i) describes the divine council with Anu at its head, while in *Atra-ḫasis*, Enlil is in charge of gathering the gods to discuss about the crisis at hand. During these meetings, the gods often drink and feast (*Enuma Elish* II, 129–38; *KTU*² 1.2 I) before negotiating solutions and hearing the final decisions of the main god(s).

No doubt, the functioning of the human royal and judicial courts inspired the representation of the divine assembly. The main concern of the assembly is to provide divine authority for the governance of the whole world (divine and human). Marduk in the Babylonian mythology and Baʿl in its Ugaritic counterpart (*KTU*² 1.39:7) are proclaimed “king of the gods” by the divine assembly, the qualities required of the gods being intelli-

gence, wisdom, and the ability to predict future outcomes. Their decisions are presented as verdict.

Sometimes the discussion within the divine assembly illustrate the structure of the pantheon and the different functions of the gods. For example, Enki/Ea frequently addresses Anu or Enlil and challenges their decision as he tries to protect humanity from punishment and destruction. Inanna/Ishtar shows her impulsive nature and asserts her claim for a realm without limits. Moreover, while volunteering to resolve crises, Marduk proves himself superior to the other gods. In some sense, then, the assembly is a sort of stage where the deities perform. There can be excesses of various sorts (e.g., fury, drunkenness, violence), proving that even the gods may lose the control but must act according to a moral or civic code to guarantee a balanced management of the world.

Through the decisions of the divine assembly terrible events are justified, such as the death of a man (Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*), the destruction of a city (Ur in the *Lament of Ur*, 137–69), or the annihilation of humanity (the flood myth in several texts). The divine council, however, can also promote people. Thus, in the Ugaritic *Kirta* myth dealing with the concept of ideal kingship, the “meeting of the gods” blesses the young prince on the occasion of his marriage (*KTU*² 1.15 ii 1–iii 19).

Nissinen (2002) has recently called attention to a particularly interesting aspect in the construction of the authority ascribed to the divine assembly, namely, the involvement of prophets. Prophets were also invited to participate in the council of the gods. Letters from Mari (18th cent. BCE), a contemporary oracle from Eshnunna, the *Deir 'Allā* Inscription (ca. 700 BCE), and certain Neo-Assyrian oracles (7th cent. BCE) prove that the prophet was viewed as an intermediary between the gods' decisions in assembly and the kings. In the Neo-Assyrian evidence, Ishtar is both the divine intercessor in the council on behalf of the king and the one who inspires prophecies. Accordingly, one of the functions of the prophets was to attend the sessions of the divine assembly and then proclaim its decisions. Neo-Assyrian rituals suggest the divine council was ceremonially celebrated as a cultic event in the sanctuaries, with the participation of the prophets, and not merely an abstract concept.

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