

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript
Episode 340
The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 12
September 5, 2020

Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)
Host: Trey Stricklin (TS)

Episode Summary

Hebrews 12:1 opens with a familiar exhortation: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. . . .” Most discussion in church and Bible studies focuses on the struggle with sin, with the “cloud of witnesses” is usually interpreted as the believers in the preceding chapter. This episode of the podcast explores contextual clues in Hebrews 2 and 12, and the Old Testament context of Psalm 89 to support the conclusion that there’s much more going on in Heb 12:1, specifically with respect to the biblical theology of the divine council.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 340: The Cloud of Witnesses of Hebrews 12. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing this week?

MH: Pretty good. I was more interested to hear how *you* were doing, because there was just a hurricane in Louisiana. I know you’re not in Louisiana, but just wondering if you got hit by any of that at all as it moved around.

TS: No, I’m in West Texas, so we’re too far north and west to get any kind of that blowback from the hurricanes.

MH: Yeah. We have a lot of people who listen in Louisiana, and specifically even in the New Orleans area. So I’m sure it was a big deal there—traumatic.

TS: Yeah, we pray everybody’s safe, for sure.

MH: Yeah, absolutely.

TS: Mike, something fun we could talk about to switch gears here. Tell me about... We have to hurry up this podcast, because you’ve got a movie to get to. What’s going on?

MH: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah, down here, they opened theaters. They're still doing the social distancing thing with the seating, but to get people in (and we'll all wear masks and stuff) they are showing *The Lord of the Rings: The Extended Edition*, and it's only \$5 to get in. So all my kids are, like, "We've got to go!" And of course, that's an easy argument to win with me. Anybody who listened to the Louis Markos interview we did... I have not seen the extended version yet. So that's why... We started a little early today so we could make that, get our seats there.

TS: Well, let me know how eating popcorn with masks on goes.

MH: [laughs] Yeah. Right. You slip it in behind and then it just finds its way to your mouth. [laughs]

TS: So does the Heiser clan get treats? Do they get popcorn? Do we just go in cold turkey? Do we sneak snacks in? What are we doing here?

MH: Oh, no, we get them. I don't eat the candy stuff, but the girls like the candy. If I get something, it's popcorn. But Drenna likes... I don't even know if they have it here, but in Washington, the theaters had this popcorn with Cheetos in it. You know, the spicy Cheetos. So that was what she always got. So we'll see.

TS: You know what we do is we get popcorn and we put the jalapeños in the popcorn.

MH: Uh huh. Okay.

TS: Yeah, that's what me and my wife do. It's good.

MH: That sounds good, actually, because I love jalapenos.

TS: Yeah, and you get that little juice. Because they have it over there where the hot dog condiments are.

MH: Yeah, yeah.

TS: So you just get as many jalapenos, put some of that juice on there, and it makes it hot. It's good. You're welcome.

MH: Okay, if they have that today, I'm going to try that. If they have that sitting out.

TS: Alright, report back to us next week and let us know how that goes down.

MH: Alright, yeah. That sounds good, actually.

TS: Alright, good deal. And also, Mike, everybody's favorite time of the year is coming around: football. I know everybody out there is just chomping at the bit for us to start up Fantasy Football again. So their wish has come true.

MH: Yeah, you don't have long to wait. [laughter]

TS: You've got about a week or two...

MH: I did two mock drafts this week, though. So trying to get my head into it. I'm still in baseball. I'm not doing real well, but I might make the playoffs in two weeks. So I'm trying to do both here. It's just taxing my brain, you know?

TS: Yeah. Well, that's good. And I'm going to give a little sneak peek, Mike. I want to give away something in just a little bit. But I'm just going to say that in the month of October, be looking for something exciting. That's all I'm going to say. I'm going to leave it right there. I'm not going to say anything else.

MH: Alright, I'm not going to touch it. I'm not going to touch it.

TS: October. You want to make sure you're listening around October. Because it's going to be fun. So there you go. That's all I'm going to say, Mike. A little two-month tease there. And with that, today... I love Divine Council days. Today's a Divine Council topic.

5:00

MH: Yeah it is. We're going to have some connection to it, pretty specifically. And I don't think that's really a surprise to the audience. Because, you know, we told them we were going to do the cloud witnesses in Hebrews 12. And I'm just going to read the line, just to jump in here as we get started. This is a familiar line from the book of Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...

And then the verse continues:

...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...

That's Hebrews 12:1, but it's the first part about the being "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" that we're going to try to focus on today. Now a lot of listeners are going to think, "Well, we did a series on the book of Hebrews already." And that's true. But don't presume this is a repeat. It's not. In the episode on Hebrews 12 in the series, I had to get to various things in the chapter and didn't actually spend much time at all on the "witness in the clouds" idea in its Old Testament context—some of the Old Testament material that might (I think certainly does) relate to it. So that's what we're going to try to do now. I

made the point in the old series that the cloud of witnesses are the believers who have gone on before us—examples in Hebrews 11. That’s the obvious stuff. And the wording there suggests we’re bringing them up because they’re other members of God’s family. And if you’re familiar with my work, you’re mentally (as you listened to that old episode on Hebrews 12) looping in the notion that God wanted a family, and that includes members of the heavenly host. And I said a little bit about that, maybe a sentence or two, and I mentioned Hebrews 2 also in that regard, where Jesus presents God to us, and us to God. There’s a Divine Council scene there. But I didn’t really do too much of it in that episode. So this is... We’re going to camp on this. And just to set the table here, I just read Hebrews 12:1 about being “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Let’s also loop in Hebrews 12:22-23. A little bit later in the same chapter, we read this:

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...

Now the Divine Council flavoring in those two verses is pretty obvious. You’ve got both families of God (the supernatural family and the human family) all in one scene. Mount Zion, the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem... It’s all there. But there’s more specifically that I want to drill down on with regard to the language of the cloud and the witnesses and all that stuff in the very first verse. So these two verses that come later in Hebrews 12 are going to help us, but we’re going to try to put these things together and then think about some Old Testament context for this, or at least some Old Testament support for the idea.

Now a couple of thoughts as far as immediate context. Hebrews 12, starting with verse 1 all the way through, is not a scene in heaven. You can just read it and that’s pretty clear. Rather, it’s a commentary about believers with respect to a cloud of witnesses. That’s how the chapter opens. “We’re surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Yeah. And that is... We’re surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Okay. That seems to include... It’s around the heels of Hebrews 11. So we’ve got some sort of relationship with a spiritual community—a heavenly community—that includes great believers of the past. All that is pretty evident. You go from Hebrews 11 right into verse 12. And of course, verse 12 leads off with the telltale sign: “therefore.” There’s this note about, “Well, now we’re going to draw conclusions in light of Hebrews 11.” So there’s some relationship there. And there’s some sort of spiritual community, because all those people in Hebrews 11 are dead. They were faithful believers and now the writer is talking to believers today. And that’s what’s transparent. But what’s up with this language (the cloud and the witnesses)? And how does that fit into what we read later in verses 22 and 23?

10:00

So it's easy to seat the context for Hebrews 12 is chapter 11. Okay? That's part of it. If you keep reading in verses 3-11, you're going to get family language that explains the suffering of believers in the context of the family with God at the head. So you're going to get that. Part of endurance motivation for those believers is their membership, though, in the new Jerusalem (the new Zion), the assembly of the firstborn, and of course all of that relates to Jesus, who is our brother (that's Hebrews 2) and who is the one who has done a faithful work to create this community—this thing we're enrolled in in heaven in the first place.

Now having said all that, I want to start with... What's typical? I mean, how do commentators typically look at this? And to be blunt about it, it's a little disappointing. Because they're thinking of Hebrews 11. And the people there are not so much in the context of this whole notion of God wanting a family from the very beginning that includes supernatural beings—that has humans fit for sacred space—God wanting this blended family from the Old Testament, specifically the way everything starts (Eden). And it's appropriate to think of that, because you get Hebrews 12:22-23, and it mentions the heavenly Jerusalem. So that's the way it concludes. There's something about the destiny of believers that somehow relates to this cloud of witnesses, that somehow relates to the earlier chapter in Hebrews 11, that ultimately ought to be judged and thought about in terms of God's Old Testament family plan from the very beginning. But often commentators... Frequently, that stuff's just not on the radar. Let me give you an example. This is from Lane's commentary in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. Here's what he writes about the first couple of verses in Hebrews 12. He says:

The extended period in vv 1–2 develops the metaphor of an athletic contest in a stadium or arena.

Now let me just stop there. That's an assumption. That is a pure assumption. There's no athletic contest language in the passage. Instead the language of the passage is the stuff I just listed out for you. But it's an assumption that the cloud of witnesses is basically a cheering section, like in an athletic contest. Now let me continue with Lane. He says this metaphor of an athletic contest in a stadium or arena...

It offers two encouragements for Christian perseverance in faith and obedience toward the prescribed goal. The first encouragement is the certainty of being surrounded by "a host of witnesses." [MH: that would be your audience] These "witnesses" are the men and women of chap. 11 who have received acknowledgment from God because of the constancy of their faith (11:2, 4, 5, 39). They figure in Scripture as witnesses to the character and validity of committed faithfulness, whose lives provide evidence for subsequent generations of the possibilities of faith.

Now I don't have any problem with that except for the assumption that we have a cheering section metaphor (an athletic contest metaphor) that controls or governs the way we should think about this. I just don't see that at all. I don't know how that's going to contribute much to what happens in verses 22 and 23 or develop anything that you see in Hebrews 2 about a meeting in heaven with (and I'll borrow Hebrews 12 language here) the human family that is now enrolled in the family of God in Hebrews 2. What I'm suggesting out of the gate here is that we need to be reading Hebrews 2, Hebrews 12:1, and Hebrews 12:22-23 together. And if you do that, and then you link it back... If you take the language of those passages and you link it back to God's original plan (his salvation plan)... I mean, look at Hebrews 2. It even quotes Psalm 8 about "you've made man a little lower than the *elohim*." I mean, to me, this is very obvious. But instead what you get is, "Oh, this is..." We just talked about popcorn. "Pass the popcorn. This is an athletic metaphor. It's a cheering section." You've got to do better than that. [laughs] Okay? Again, I don't know where it comes from other than a crowd, and I don't know how it contributes anything or develops any of these thoughts from these other portions of Scripture. If you think that's kind of unique with Lane here, I'll pick another commentary. This is O'Brien's commentary. And these are commentaries I use and I like. But he writes here:

15:00

A cloud was a common metaphor for a great throng of people [MH: okay, that makes sense], while the demonstrative *such a great* is emphatic and draws attention to the number and magnificence of that assembly. This throng of witnesses is the men and women of chapter 11 who received testimony from God in Scripture to the constancy of their faith (11:2, 4, 5, and 39). Of particular relevance for the listeners are those who *endured* by faith (11:35b–38).

Again, all that's fine. He loses (thankfully), at least here, the athletic metaphor. But nothing that he just said there isn't self-evident. Okay, it's a crowd. What do we do with that? How do we think about that crowd? What's the point? So this is what I hope to do. I would suggest that Hebrews 12:22-24 (and also Hebrews 2) gives us several indicators that we need to consider a different way of understanding the metaphor. Let me just read those two verses again. Hebrews 12:22, 23, and I'm going to loop verse 24 into it.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God...

Right there you have temple. You have sacred space. You've got the divine presence. Where God's presence is, his entourage is. Plenty of Old Testament passages about the throne room of God and the cherubim and the seraphim. There it is.

...you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God...

Obviously they're not in Jerusalem literally. They're not in the city of the living God literally. They're not in the heavenly Jerusalem, certainly. So this is all theological messaging.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...

Of course, Jesus is quite evident in Hebrews 2. So let's notice a few things here on the surface. Notice the verb: believers *have come*. "You have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem," to this angelic gathering, "to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." "You *have come*" to these things. Okay? In other words... In Greek, this is a perfect tense. Perfect tense refers to an action that has been accomplished with ongoing effects or results. So this is like an "already, but (of course) not yet" statement. "You are already there. You have come to all this stuff." And "the spirits of the righteous already perfected." Okay? That's a reference back to Hebrews 11. We get it. In some sense, you're already part of that community that includes glorified believers in God's presence, that includes the heavenly host (Divine Council language). You're already part of that. It includes Jesus, the mediator of the new and better covenant.

The point is that, spiritually speaking, you're not part of the *old* community, for sure—the one where God could not be approached. If you read the verses that lead up to this, you're not part of the one where God couldn't be approached on the mountain and people were scared out of their wits, and so on and so forth. Only Moses could be there. You're not in that community, but you've become part of God's family, which is all-inclusive. And you have this access now. But not yet. Because the reader knows that "we're not in the heavenly Jerusalem. Where are the angels?" It's an "already, but not yet" sort of statement.

Now I'm going to ask a question here. Now in light of all that, what if we didn't separate Hebrews 12:1 from these two verses? What if we *did* consider them together? What if we didn't separate the cloud of witnesses from the assembly of the firstborn, enrolled in heaven, the innumerable angels in festal gathering? What if we let God and Jesus be in the room (as it were) as well? What if we read all these things in tandem? What if we looped Hebrews 2 in here? Because after all, it presents believers in the congregation... (It says that point-blank in Hebrews 2, and we'll go back to that passage in a bit.) What if we looped Hebrews 2 in? It presents believers in the congregation or the assembly of God (the Divine Council). Jesus and God are present. Okay? And we get introduced to God and so on and so forth. We have a meeting. We have a gathering. "Here

20:00

are the children,” Jesus says, “that you’ve given me.” What if we read all these things together? What if we parsed Hebrews 12’s content with a focus on the New Covenant? What if the thing that united both Hebrews 2 and 12 was Jesus? I would think that would be kind of obvious, but let’s just say it out loud. What if the thing that united these passages was Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant? Would we just read the passage (Hebrews 12:1) as “keep the faith because earlier believers are cheering you on,” or is there more? Again, I’m going to suggest that there’s more. And for me, the decisive elements for that question are the Divine Council terms—the Divine Council language—in Hebrews 12 and the focus on Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant. To me, these are key elements. I’d say our reading of the cloud of witnesses ought to take specific note that whatever this cloud or the assembly of the firstborn, or our enrollment in heaven among the angels points to, it is inseparable from Jesus and his work.

So what does the book of Hebrews have Jesus doing? Again, we had this series on Hebrews, so this should be readily apparent. Does it describe his work in relation to human believers and the wider family of God anywhere else? I mean, if you look at Hebrews 2, and you’re saying, “Well, let’s go back to Hebrews 12:22-23. Okay. Mount Zion, city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, enumerable angels, festal gathering, assembly of the firstborn, enrolled in heaven. Okay, there’s God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Okay, there are believers who’ve been faithful in the past. There’s the Hebrews 11 crowd. Oh, and verse 24, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. They’re all together!” We thought about the book of Hebrews. Where else does that happen? Where else do you have a heavenly gathering with God present, Jesus present, and human believers and supernatural beings referenced? The answer is Hebrews 2. So again, this is really important to consider all of these things. Hebrews 2 and 12 situate their “humans in the council” or “humans in the assembly of the firstborn with the angels” scenes... They both do it. They situate this discussion in that context. But they do it... Not only is it sort of, “Okay, they sound similar, but I’m going to put them side by side, or consecutively.” Just listen to how both Hebrews 12 (I’m going to read the first two verses again) and then Hebrews 2 (I’m going to read verses 1-4 and verse 9)... Listen to how similar these things are. I’m just trying to get you to consider taking Hebrews 12 and Hebrews 2 in tandem here. So here’s Hebrews 12:1-2.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Here's Hebrews 2:1

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

It shares a warning with Hebrews 12.

² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Again, you've got a heavenly meeting. You've got a reference to Jesus, the founder and perfecter, the author of salvation. You've got a reference to his suffering and death so that he might taste death for everyone and bring all these circumstances about. You know, there's a lot of similarity, just in what the writer is concerned about in both places. Hebrews 2 has Jesus bringing many sons (or children) to glory, as the founder of their salvation. And he introduces his father to his human brothers and sisters, "...to God in the midst of the congregation." I'm going to go back and read that. I've referenced it a couple times, but let's go to Hebrews 2, just so it's fresh in your mind here.

**⁵ For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶ It has been testified somewhere,
"What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?"**

⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels [MH: Psalm 8 has *elohim*];

**you have crowned him with glory and honor,
⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet."**

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely

Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

25:00 Then we have this reference, right after that.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory,

The term there is “sons” (Greek), but it’s also used for children. So it’s brothers and sisters. He’s bringing many to humans (part of his human family)... Bringing the human family into the picture. Bringing them to glory.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory...

A few lines later.:

¹¹...That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.

Brothers and sisters. Jesus used this filial language.

**¹² saying,
“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”**

The midst of the congregation. Well, obviously, the setting there is the heavenly presence of God. It’s Divine Council setting. It’s Divine Council language. Now I’m going to ask you to store something away here. But “in the midst of the congregation,” the word for congregation there in the Greek is *ekklesia*. Just hold onto that. So the council setting, the council meeting, the council itself, is referred to as *ekklesia* in Hebrews 2. We’re going to come back to that in a bit. It’s going to have an interesting payoff here.

But Hebrews 2 has this “bringing many sons to glory,” filling up the human family of God. Hebrews 12 has Jesus “enduring from sinners hostility against himself.” What’s the result? Well, he’s the mediator of a new and better covenant of salvation, whose sprinkled blood allows his human siblings to “come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn” (the assembly of the firstborn) “who are enrolled in heaven...” Language we’ve read from 22 and 23. Guess what? “The assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” Guess what the Greek word for assembly is in Hebrews 12:23? Yep, it’s

ekklesia. The same term as back in Hebrews 2. Store *that* away. We will come back to that a bit later (again).

My point, again, (I'm belaboring this because I want to drill this into your heads) is that it really isn't difficult to read Hebrews 2 and 12 together. There's a lot going on that's similar between them. And I'm suggesting that we have a Divine Council setting referenced in both.

Now there was a lot of talk about covenant ("better covenant of salvation" in Hebrews 12), a lot of talk about what Jesus accomplished in both Hebrews 2 and Hebrews 12. Covenant, of course, this new covenant idea... Covenant language occurs many times in the book of Hebrews. The old covenant, of course, was Sinai, Torah, the Law. The better or new covenant language in some passages might refer to a specific covenant (for example, the Davidic covenant). The kingship element is there. It might refer to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, where the coming of the Spirit... I mean, Hebrews 10:16 seems to allude to the new covenant specifically. But most often the covenant language refers just broadly to the general work of Jesus (what Jesus accomplished). For example, when "covenant" is used in relation to blood in Hebrews 9:15-20, that's a clear reference to atonement. The whole picture of the work of Christ seems to be in view in Hebrews in that kind of language—that kind of referencing of covenant stuff—his role as the superior high priest, the superior sacrifice, the superior ruler... So on and so forth. In other words, the new covenant (or better covenant) refers to the fact that Jesus obeyed the Father and accomplished his mission as the messiah. Hebrews refers generally to this obedience of Jesus and what it accomplished.

And this brings us to the messianic plan, just generally here, and the cloud language. So to this point, I've said let's read Hebrews 12:1 in light of Hebrews 12:22-23, and also in light of Hebrews 2. Because you have Divine Council language that links all of these things together. You have Divine Council language. Now you can see it clearly between verses 22 and 23 and Hebrews 2. And I'm going to argue that we should loop in the first verse (the cloud of witnesses) into this. It's not just Hebrews 11. Even though the believers who have gone before, who are already and presently enrolled in heaven because of their believing loyalty... I'm not excluding them. They're in there. But Hebrews 12:1, because they're in there and because of some of these other things, it's legitimate to read verse 1 in light of this Divine Council gathering that we see in Hebrews 2 and in verses 22 and 23 of Hebrews 12.

30:00

So I want to say a little bit more about specifically the cloud language here. A few episodes ago (I think it was 336)... It was the episode on divine "begetting" language in Matthew. A few episodes ago I mentioned Psalm 89:36-37. And in the Hebrew numbering of the verses (the verses in the Hebrew Bible), that would be verses 37 and 38. I mentioned that passage in regard to "cloud witness" language. Psalm 89 is both a Divine Council scene... (That's Psalm 89:5-8. I'll

read those in a moment.) And it's also a psalm about the Davidic covenant. In other words, it's ultimately about the ultimate son of David (the messiah, Jesus). Here are some relevant excerpts from the psalm. I'm just going to read you a few portions. So here are verses 5-7.

**⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,**

This is ESV. It's *bene elim*—sons of God.

**⁷ a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,
and awesome above all who are around him?**

You skip down to verse 19. Here are verses 19-21. We start to get into the David stuff.

¹⁹ Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one...

Now I'm going to stop there. It'd be interesting for you if you don't have ESV to look at how other translations render this. But literally, this word is a plural in Hebrew. You could translate this (and perhaps should):

¹⁹ Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly *ones*...

It's a group. I wonder who that group might be. Well, we might get a suggestion from the verses that have preceded. The Divine Council. And we will probably get the same sort of support from what comes a little bit later. But anyway...

¹⁹ Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly ones [MH: I'm going to use the plural], and said:

**"I have granted help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
[MH: This is God announcing this to his council.]**

**²⁰ I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him,
²¹ so that my hand shall be established with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.**

Then we go down to verse 24:

**24 My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
and in my name shall his horn be exalted.**

**25 I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.**

**26 He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.'**

**27 And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.**

**28 My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.**

**29 I will establish his offspring forever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.**

Now clearly this isn't about the literal, physical David. It's David referenced as the dynastic ruler, the dynastic line (i.e., the messiah). "I will set his hand on the sea, his right hand on the rivers." "Sea" is *yam*. "Rivers" is the *naharim*. So we've got here... Some of you are already going to be tracking on this, if you were familiar with the Baal Cycle. These are Baal's two opponents (*yam* and *nahar*). He conquers them and becomes king of the gods and king of the nations. So the psalmist is looping this language in to testify (like Old Testament writers do so many times) who *is* the king of glory. [laughs] Okay? Back to that episode. Who is this really identifying? Who really is going to be king of the gods and king of the nations? Well the answer to that would be the messiah. And oh, by the way, for those things to be true, you have to have a divine messiah. Just put that on the checklist, okay?

**27 And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.**

The highest there is *elyon*, which is a term pregnant with meaning in other Old Testament Divine Council passages.

29 I will establish his offspring forever...

35:00 Who *are* David's offspring, by the way? Well, if it's the messiah, and the messiah (the son of David) is Jesus, who's the family of Jesus? That would be us. And yes, we have everlasting life.

...and his throne as the days of the heavens.

When Christ ascends to the right hand of the Father, it's a done deal. It's the kingdom already, and not yet, and never ceasing. I'm throwing this stuff in because of the messianic flavoring. Now you go down to verse 34. Here are a few more verses on it. Reading verses 34-37.

- ³⁴ I will not violate my covenant [MH: I'm not going to violate this]
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.**
- ³⁵ Once for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.**
- ³⁶ His offspring shall endure forever,
his throne as long as the sun before me.**
- ³⁷ Like the moon it shall be established forever,
a faithful witness in the skies."**

Now a couple of quick items. "Faithful witness in the skies," verse 37. (This would be verse 38 in Hebrew.) The word translated skies is שָׁמַיִם and it occurs not only here in verse 37, but also in verse 6.

- ⁶ For who in the skies [*b'shahak*] can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the [sons of God] is like the LORD...**

So the same term (*shahak*) in verses 37 and back in verse 6 can be translated (in either place) as "clouds" ("who in the clouds"). If you looked at *shahak* in its usage, it refers to the sky. What do we see in the sky? The clouds. Okay? You could translate it either way. It's interesting (or maybe a little odd), the Septuagint translates the first occurrence for "Who in the skies (*shahak*) can be compared to the Lord?" with the lemma *nephele* (clouds). "For who in the clouds can be compared to the Lord?" But oddly, it doesn't do that in verse 37. It picks *ouranos* (the heavens or the skies). And it might be (this is just a guess on my part on why the Septuagint would not do it in verse 37) because the sun and the moon are also mentioned, and the translator may not want to associate clouds (or he didn't associate clouds) with nighttime. So since the moon is looped in there, it's nighttime. We don't have clouds at night, visible from the earth. Who knows? That's just a guess. There's no real telling as to why (maybe he just wanted a varied vocabulary) clouds in the first occurrence and heavens or skies in the second one. Just rabbit trailing a little bit.

Another note. Proper translation in verse 37 is "witness in the skies" or "in the clouds," not technically "cloud witnesses." It's sort of six of one and half a dozen of the other, but I mention it because some scholars make a point of it. I think it's

a distinction without a difference ultimately. It's grammatically correct to say "witness in the skies" or "in the clouds." I say it's a distinction without a difference because ultimately the witness hails from the heavenly realm. It's the same idea. The ancient Near Eastern treaty material that I'm going to discuss now (this is where we're headed) has this idea as well.

Now also a few episodes ago, when we talked about divine begetting, I mentioned my dissertation when I discussed Psalm 89 (which we just read a portion of) and its Divine Council language. And I'll read it again. I read this sentence.

Ps 89:37-38 [MH: in] (Hebrew) has received a good deal of scholarly attention. At issue is the identity of the faithful witness in the clouds of verse 38. E. Theodore Mullen argues that the witness could be an unidentified member of the divine council, whereas P[aul] Mosca, rejecting Mullen's thesis, contends that the witness is the Davidic throne itself. T[imo] Veijola believes the witness is Yahweh himself.

So the faithful witness in the clouds is either Yahweh, some unidentified Divine Council member, or the throne of David. From this point I'm going to interact with Veijola's article. He demolishes [laughs] (I'll just put it that way) Mosca's idea, that this is the throne of David. And so does Mullen, for that matter. It's terribly weak. It's so weak that it doesn't deserve continued attention. And if you read Veijola's article... The article is called "The witness in the clouds: Psalm 89:38." I'll put it in the protected folder. Veijola actually gets a little snarky in this article toward Mosca's view. That does happen in journal literature. But anyway, we're going to proceed on the assumption that this is either Yahweh or an unidentified Divine Council member.

40:00

Now in terms of biblical data, Mullen appeals to Job 16:19-21. So I'm going to read that—Job 16:19-21 as supporting his view that we have a Divine Council context and so this faithful witness in the clouds or in the skies is an unidentified Divine Council member. Here's what Job 16:19-21 says. Job's the speaker.

¹⁹ Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, [MH: *Shamayim* there. It's not *shahak*. It's another word for the heavens, the skies.]

and he who testifies for me is on high.

²⁰ My friends scorn me;

my eye pours out tears to God,

²¹ that he would argue the case of a man with God,

as a son of man does with his neighbor.

Now this is part of the whole complex. We've done a whole episode on the heavenly books in the Old Testament. And part of that is this role of mediator for members of the heavenly host. They play the role of mediator between God and people, recording what they did, reporting to God, being an advocate for people. This is where the "guardian angel" idea comes from. It's really not guarding people from evil or whatever, but there is an advocacy idea there, of angels presenting what's happening to people on their behalf to God, and so on and so forth.

Now that shifts a great deal when you get to the New Testament, because Jesus presumes those roles for kind of obvious reasons. But again, it's there. And so this witness in the clouds idea, Mullen says here we have another example of this. And he goes in a few other places in Job and discusses this. Now Veijola has no problem with that. Both Mullen and Veijola make reference to ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties, and this is ultimately where I want to go. They have witnesses in the clouds (in the heavens, in the heavenly realm, in the divine realm). This is what the clouds (the skies) are. Think of your ancient Near Eastern/ancient Israelite cosmology. Well, of course God and his heavenly host are in heaven. They're in the skies. They're in the clouds. Of course they are, because that's where divine beings live. They don't live on earth. Earth was created for human habitation. They visit earth. But this isn't their natural domain because they're not embodied by nature, and so on and so forth. I mean, this is territory we've traversed many times in this podcast.

So go back to your cosmology and think about this, and it's kind of obvious. Well, in the ancient world, when ancient Near Eastern people would make treaties, they would call on... We actually have examples of this. Veijola references nine of these treaties. I don't know if all of them are... It's not just Hittite stuff. The one he actually quotes is a Hittite treaty. But Veijola writes:

As far as I know, nine vassal and parity treaties of this type made by the Hittites are extant in the Hittite, Akkadian, or Egyptian versions.

So they are Hittite treaties, but they're in these other languages as well. And it's not unique to them. I mean, you have other treaties where the gods will be drawn into the arrangement, basically to intimidate people or to certify, "Hey, if we violate this treaty or if you violate this treaty, the gods are our witness." We would say "As God is my witness." It's kind of like swearing on the Bible in court. "God is my witness that we're going to honor this. We're going to be true to it. We're not going to violate it. We're going to stick with it." In the ancient Near Eastern world, you would have witnesses (divine beings that are in the heavenlies) certify—validate—a covenant. Here's the one Veijola quotes. I'll just throw it in here. This is the treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru. There's the terms of the covenant, then an entire list of gods. And here's the end. I'll pick it

up with the last... Well, that's not the last deity. But I'm not going to read you all of the deity names. I'll skip most of them.

...Ereskigal, the gods and goddesses of the Hatti land, the gods and goddesses of Amurru land [MH: those are the two sides of the treaty, so all of them are watching], all the olden gods, Naras, Napsaras, Minki, Tuhusi, Ammunki, Ammizadu, Allalu [MH: there's an interesting one – Allah Lu – sounds like Allah, but that's for another investigation], Anu, Antu, Apantu, Ellil, Ninlil, [MH: and then we start listing the features of the heaven and earth realm] the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great Sea, heaven and earth, the winds (and) the clouds— let these be witnesses to this treaty and to the oath.

45:00

Now one item stands out right away. The clouds (at least in this treaty) are distinct from the divine beings. The clouds themselves aren't divine beings in this one. They're basically a meteorological reference. That actually isn't a problem for what I'm suggesting here, as the biblical view of the Divine Council isn't going to endorse the idea that meteorological phenomena are entities or members of God's heavenly host. Note the treaty language here doesn't include stars. Those would be the divine beings in the list, and ancient Near Eastern peoples tended to use stars or think of stars as divine beings. And here it seems careful to not overlap those two ideas. But regardless, *of course* the divine beings are going to be in the heavens—in the skies. They're going to be watching. And when you look at this list (the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great Sea, heaven and earth, the winds and the clouds), these are all places (except for the reference to earth) that humans don't live. But "heaven and earth" is an expression of totality. And even in the earth, you have the underworld. I mean, basically this wording is, like, all the deities—the whole pantheon. Let them bear witness to this treaty and the oath.

Now I think what's going on here, if we think of this sort of treaty language and associate it with heaven (the heavens, the skies, the clouds), that needs to become part of the way we think about the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12. Why? Because if you get down to verses 22 and 23 and you loop in Hebrews 2, this is language about a group that includes the people of Hebrews 11, that includes the readers of Hebrews who are believers, and it includes God and the heavenly host, the innumerable angels, and Jesus. The language here is about a future family gathering in the heavens, in and among and with the Divine Council. This is why the wording is what it is. And Mullen and Veijola aren't talking about the New Testament here (Hebrews 12). But I think they're on the right track on Psalm 89, because they're going to loop these treaties into the discussion of what's going on in Psalm 89 with the faithful witness in the clouds. Basically, they spend their time talking about, "Hey, this is the Davidic Covenant in Psalm 89." And it was common to have the Divine Council as part of covenant-making. And this is what we see in Psalm 89 in these two verses. So in the biblical material, we have these two terms: *shamayim* (the heavens or sky) and *shahak* (the one

used in Psalm 89:37 and 89:6). They're used to describe, in other contexts, the space above the earth. But in many cases, this language is used to speak of God and his council, in terms of rulership. Here's the classic biblical example of that. Daniel 4:26. I've reference Daniel 4 many times in relation to how the Divine Council participates in God's decisions. Daniel 4, this is Nebuchadnezzar. A watcher (a holy one) comes to him and says, "Hey, you're going to go insane for a while." So on and so forth. "This is bad news." And he says at one point, "This is by decree of the watchers." And then he also says, "This is by decree of the Most High." And then in verse 26, it says:

²⁶ And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.

There's the Aramaic version of *shamayim*. *Shemayim* is the lemma. But the skies aren't ruling, like the literal clouds in the air, and stuff like that. It's a reference to... It's a good example of *shamayim* being God and his council. That's who rules here. Heaven rules, you know? And we have expressions today, like, "Heaven help us." Well, we're really appealing to God, not the sky. Okay? This is what's going on in Psalm 89 and I'm going to suggest this is what's going on in Hebrews 12—that the reference to the cloud of witnesses is God and his council, and it includes believers of the past. And "you *have come* to this festal gathering, company of innumerable angels enrolled in heaven." I mean, the writer of Hebrews is looping believers into this assembly, this congregation, this council. He's lumping them into the witnesses from chapter 11. So again, this is a Divine Council setting, it's a Divine Council context, to understand the cloud of witnesses.

50:00

Now I want to read what Goldengay says. I want to spend a little more time in Psalm 89 and then we'll wrap up here. You go back to Psalm 89:5. "Who in the skies" (*shahak*)... "Who in the clouds or the skies is like the Lord (is like Yahweh)?" And we have these two terms: *shahak* or *shamayim*. They point to the same thing. So Goldingay writes this of this Divine Council passage:

Alongside the parallelism of "wonders" and "truthfulness" is that of "the heavens" [MH: *shahak*] and "the congregation of the holy," the latter giving precision to the former. It is the body called "the divine assembly," the assembly of the "gods," in [MH: Psalm] 82:1. Like "gods," "holy ones" is a word that can apply to any heavenly beings...

Oh, thank you, Professor Goldengay. Isn't that what... There we go! I love this stuff when I can say, "Look, it isn't just Mike." *Elohim* is a word that can apply to any heavenly being, okay? That's all it is. It's "a word that can apply to any heavenly being." And then he references Job 5 and 15 and so forth. Job 15:15 is interesting because it's in parallelism with "heavens." Isn't that interesting for our

topic? Job 15:15. Let me just quote the whole verse. Goldengay brings it up, but it's worth a citation in view of our topic here.

**¹⁵ Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not pure in his sight;**

Now he's not talking about air pollution. "Holy ones" and "the heavens" refer to the same thing. "Heavens," "clouds," refers to the members of the Divine Council—the heavenly host. Okay? Goldengay continuing:

Only here are they called a congregation (*qāhāl*), a word that often refers to an assembly of Israel gathered for worship (e.g., Pss. 22:22, 25 [23, 26]; 35:18; 40:9, 10 [10, 11]). Although that word is used for various other earthly gatherings (e.g., 26:5; Gen. 28:3), those other psalms cohere with the idea that the assembly of the heavenly beings is here fulfilling the role of a congregation, confessing what Yhwh has done.

Marvin Tate (*Word Biblical Commentary*) on the same passage (Psalm 89):

The meaning in 89:6 is probably that of heavenly beings ("the heavens")...

See, he even goes so far... Let me go back to Psalm 89, and we want to talk about the parallelism here. Just like we had parallelism there in Job 15, in Psalm 89, let's see what we have here. Now listen to this carefully.

[Psalm 89:5]

Let the heavens [*shamayim*] praise your wonders, O Lord. Your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.

Now if you're looking at verse 5... And I would recommend looking at it in a translation that separates the two stanzas. This is poetry here. It's a psalm. "Heavens" is parallel to "assembly of the holy ones." Okay? It's interesting. But if you look in the next verse, you see it even more clearly.

**⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,**

There you have the skies, which are compared to the Lord, and then the heavenly beings compared to the Lord. So here you have an example, like Daniel 4:26, where heaven (or in this case, the skies—*shahak*, which also can be translated "clouds") refers to the Divine Council and its membership (the heavenly beings). A careful reading of this shows that the language... You have this overlap. And Tate and Goldengay, this is what they're talking about. Now this strongly argues in context that, later in the psalm, the "skies" or "clouds" is the

Divine Council. So verse 37 is talking about a faithful witness in the Divine Council. And in fact, all of this is Mullen's argument—that the faithful witness is a member of the Divine Council. Now of course Veijola says that it's Yahweh himself.

55:00

Now I don't really care for our purposes today which one it is. And ultimately, they both yield some pretty good theology. What we're angling for today is the notion that "cloud language" or "heaven language," when associated with witnesses, can indeed point to the Divine Council. That's our point for today. And if that's the case, it provides some additional Old Testament context for Hebrews 12: the cloud of witnesses, those enrolled in heaven, those who constitute the assembly of the firstborn (the council of Jesus, in effect). That it includes both believers past (Hebrews 11) and believers present (the ones who are reading the letter). That would be an unidentified group of Hebrews in the past, in the first century. But it includes *you* today. You are already, but not yet, a member of God's council. Your status as believers is in the process of becoming what it is. Your status... You are becoming what you are. This is the "already, but not yet" notion, and here it's applied to your membership in God's heavenly council—his council family. And lo and behold, that's what God wanted back in Genesis! Again, this all coheres so well with some of the ideas that we've talked about on this podcast so many times and that I wrote about in *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm* and other things. But here it is again.

Now one final note as a capstone for the episode: the "assembly of the firstborn" in Hebrews 12:23. The Greek word translated "assembly" was *ekklēsia*. Remember that from Hebrews 12:23 and how that was the same Greek word in Hebrews 2? When the human believers... Jesus says, "These are the children you've given me. I'm not afraid to call them my brothers and sisters." He does that in the congregation. That's *ekklēsia*. So the assembly of the firstborn: *ekklēsia*. The congregation where God is introduced to us and we to God: *ekklēsia*. Guess how the Septuagint translates Psalm 89:6. (In the Septuagint, it's Psalm 88:6, for those who want to look this up.) The very passage about the council that we just quoted several times. Guess how it translates that? Yep. It's *ekklēsia*. It's the same term. I see Hebrews 12:1 as a reference to the Divine Council, the witness in the clouds idea, and I think Psalm 89:5-7 (the Divine Council passage) and then verses 37-38 are part of the picture. In all three places (in Greek, at least) it's the same thing. So I think what we need to start doing is look at Hebrews 12:1 as a reference to the Divine Council and believers' membership within it to really get the point of what's going on there.

TS: Alright, Mike, another good one. I love it. I wonder, in the Divine Council, are we going to cast a ballot? Are we voting? How are we doing this? Because...

MH: [laughs] It would be hard to imagine much substantial disagreement there. [laughs]

TS: Yeah. Is it going to go around the table? Is there a big table? What's your opinion on this? What are we doing here?

MH: Everybody thumbs up. Yep.

TS: [laughs] Yeah. Yea or nay.

MH: One mind.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Well, that's good stuff. I love it. Do you have any idea what we'll cover next week? You need...

MH: We're going to do something on Ezekiel in one of the Gospels. I'm not sure which one. There's a good half dozen things on the table. But I'll pick one of those. So it'll be Ezekiel in one of the Gospels—how the Gospels repurpose that.

TS: I love it. Alright, love the Divine Council episodes. Another good one!

MH: It was fun.

TS: Alright, Mike, with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.