

YHWH'S DIVINE IMAGES

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ANCIENT NEAR EAST MONOGRAPHS

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YHWH'S DIVINE IMAGES

A Cognitive Approach

by
Daniel O. McClellan

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Atlanta

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Preface

My primary target audience with this book is scholars and students—formal and informal—of the Bible and of religion more broadly, as well as cognitive scientists of religion and cognitive linguists. As someone trained in biblical studies but adopting methodologies from the cognitive sciences, I don't believe I'll ever fully shake the sense of imposter syndrome from presuming to have something to say about fields in which I am not a specialist. However, I have been reassured by many kind and generous scholars from across these fields that that's just the nature of interdisciplinary research. I have tried to widen the scope of accessibility of this book to include interested laypeople, whom I hope can also find some value in it. I anticipate some readers will approach this book from a devotional perspective, while others will approach it from a perspective adjacent to a devotional one, and still others in the absence of any such perspective. Though I write as a faithful Latter-day Saint, this book is strictly academic, and I have made a concerted effort to recognize and mitigate the potential influence of any devotional lenses that may color my methodologies and my readings. There is certainly no conscious attempt on my part to promote any particular theological perspective in this book, though I do offer some critiques of the influence on the scholarship of certain theological sensitivities (including from my own tradition). Having said that, I suspect there are ways the book will horrify my coreligionists as well as others who are suspicious that I'm just trying to import Mormonism wholesale into the Bible. If such criticisms come in from all sides, I'll consider that a win.

One of the goals of this book is to begin to disrupt some of the scholarly conventions that are common to the study of the Hebrew Bible. As a subtle and yet influential means of structuring power and values, terminology is precisely one of those conventions. As a result, this book will be somewhat idiosyncratic in the terms it employs, and I'd like to take the opportunity here to explain myself. I begin with perhaps the least idiosyncratic terminological choice: I render the proper name of Israel's patron deity as YHWH, with the consonants of the Tetragrammaton in all caps (normally a standard when transcribing unvocalized names from ancient Southwest Asia). When vocalizing the name, a reader may

obviously substitute Yahweh, Adonai, HaShem, the Lord, Jehovah, or whatever their preference. A bit *more* idiosyncratically, however, I use the term “deity” instead of the gendered terms *god* and *goddess*. I also use gender-neutral pronouns in reference to deity, except where I am quoting secondary literature or other translations of primary sources, or where I am translating texts that are marked for gender. Though it is not unilateral, YHWH’s performance of maleness is in many places central to the rhetorical goals of the biblical authors, and so I will preserve the gendered language of ancient authors (cf. Clines 2021b but also Levinson 2022). Elsewhere, however, if the gender of an individual, divine or human, cannot be clearly demonstrated, I use gender-neutral pronouns. I will do my best to mitigate the ambiguity that can arise from the collision in the same context of singular *they* and distinct plural subjects and pronouns.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this book, I am importing some technical terminology from other disciplines that may not be familiar to readers. I have tried to reduce the jargon as much as possible, but there are a number of terms that I have maintained for the sake of economy and specificity. Some of these need explanations. A word I use in the very first sentence of the introduction is *conceptualize*, which is a verb that refers to the production in our minds of concepts, images, or ideas about something (as opposed to words). These concepts and ideas are frequently conventionalized and shared by speakers of a given language within a given society in order to make communication more efficient, and this dynamic frequently influences the way people think and talk about things. I’ll discuss some examples of how this works in more detail in the introduction. There are two other verbs that I will use in the introduction that might cause confusion. The first is *index*. When I use it as a verb, I am referring to the way an object can cue a viewer to some other entity and also store information about that entity. For instance, the great poet (Taylor Swift) once wrote of a former lover who kept a scarf in his drawer because it reminded him of her. The scarf serves to cue the person’s mind to their former lover and to aspects of their presence that the scarf may signify. In that sense, the scarf “indexes” the former lover. Similarly, a cultic object that is intended to represent a specific deity cues the viewer’s mind to that deity and can store information about them, such as their name or deeds, qualities, or relationships or events associated with them.

The last verb that requires some explanation is *presence*. In this book, to presence an agent is to reify their presence, or cause their presence to be manifested, according to someone’s perception. There is overlap between the notions of indexing and presencing, but the latter refers more directly to the generation of the perception of the presence of someone or something. I will discuss this cognitive mechanism in more detail in the first chapter, but as a simple example, that great poet mentioned that the former lover kept her scarf because it smelled like her. Smell is strongly linked to memory, and the former lover likely

smelled the scarf on occasion in order to generate that perception of presence, however fleeting. In that sense, he is “presencing” the former lover.

I also try in this book to avoid a number of rather colonizing terms that have become common in biblical scholarship. For instance, *ancient Near East* privileges a Western perspective, and even *Western* is itself a rather problematic dichotomy. Instead of the former, I use *ancient Southwest Asia*, and instead of the latter, I use *Eurocentric*. I use neither of these terms to refer to anything approximating a discrete and clearly delineable semantic category. As my discussion of prototype theory in the introduction will make clear, conceptual categories do not commonly form and are not commonly learned or used in reference to clear and consistent boundaries. Such boundaries are not inherent to most conceptual categories but form rather arbitrarily when a need for them arises, and these and the other conceptual categories I employ throughout this book are no different. I understand the terms ancient Southwest Asia and Eurocentric to focus on the exemplars of the categories and to extend outward to an ambiguous periphery where boundaries can be quite fuzzy, fluid, and debatable. In other words, the terms I use should not imply the assertion of any clear boundaries unless I indicate otherwise.

This is also true of my use of the rather loaded word *mind*. I use it to refer not just to the biological brain and associated structures, but to the collection of networks that facilitate thinking, moving, knowing, and our different senses. These are physical processes carried out through material channels, and in this sense the mind is not necessarily limited to the brain or even to the body. I thus adopt an “embodied mind” paradigm, which “insists that the mind is irreducible to the workings of any single organ or system” (Pitts-Taylor 2016, 44).¹ I will also frequently use it etically (that is, from an analytical perspective that is outside looking in) in reference to other groups’ conventionalized understandings of the various internal loci of cognition and emotion, which tend to accrete around the head, the chest, or even the abdomen. In other words, I will use the word *mind* to refer to a society’s reasoning about cognition and emotion, even if they explicitly identify those processes with, say, the heart (cf. Berendt and Tanita 2011).

Israel and Judah are also somewhat problematic designations. The data suggest Israel was the earlier of the two states, and that Israel and Judah existed separately (but with some manner of relationship) until the destruction of Israel in the late-eighth-century BCE. As Jerusalem and Judah grew in significance, their institutions seem to have appropriated Israel’s literature and history. By the Neo-Babylonian period (626–539 BCE), Judah was really the most salient

¹ Note that I use *embodied* not to refer to some process of incarnation, but to the fundamentally material nature of cognition and its constituent processes (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Wilson 2002).

identity that was left. To simplify things a bit, when I refer in general to the societies that occupied the regions prior to the Neo-Babylonian period, I will refer to *Iron Age Israel and Judah*. While this roughly covers the period between 1200 BCE and 586 BCE, I am primarily focused on the first millennium BCE, which covers the Iron Age II period. When speaking more specifically about the northern or southern kingdoms, I will refer to either Israel or Judah, and exclusively the latter from the exile on (unless I am referring to the Hebrew Bible's own use of "Israel" as a shared identity).

A final and perhaps unexpected lexical omission from this book is the term *religion*. Any attempt to reconstruct ancient ideologies and worldviews must engage with the imposition of modern conceptual frameworks to schematize the data, and religion is a framework employed by virtually all scholars to structure data regarding deities and their care and feeding. This significantly impacts the results of their reconstructions.² Every reference to religious *texts*, religious *beliefs*, religious *practices*, and to any other religious domains of experience evokes an entire suite of conceptual structures and content that will differ from reader to reader, but may not be warranted in any configuration, and may be significantly distorting. Far beyond simply shaping our discourse about these issues and the conclusions we reach, when these frameworks cease to be provisional heuristics that are consistently critiqued and compared to others, they can become cemented into our conceptual architecture, and they can govern how we are able to *think* and *communicate* about them. At that point, they become "stultifying conventions" (Saler 2000, 74–75) that might not only evade detection but might effectively marshal academic consensus and other power structures against their uprooting.³ Religion can be one such stultifying convention.

These conventions cannot be overcome through the continued application of the same theoretical models that have for so long fostered and nurtured them. Rather, what is required is the imposition of outside methodologies, and the most robust of those methodologies have demonstrated the socially constructed nature of the category of religion.⁴ If religion is to be gainfully studied going forward, it must be as a modern social construct that is discursively reified (that is, brought about or created through discourse), and not as a transhistorical and transcultural

² For examples of how the framework of religion influences our structuring of the data, see Nongbri 2008, 2013.

³ Scholarship that benefits from this prophylaxis is overwhelmingly produced by elite, white, straight, Eurocentric males, which privileges a small set of perspectives that tend to be more closely tied to the power structures that have given shape to the contemporary conceptualization of religion.

⁴ See Nongbri 2013 for one of the more accessible examples. For recent comments on the construction of this category in concert with the construction of the concept of politics, see Fitzgerald 2015.

constant.⁵ In light of this, the category of religion, irrespective of the specific framework or definitional approach, is not helpful as a heuristic or organizing principle for the study of the Hebrew Bible, which has no word for “religion” (Barton and Boyarin, 2016). There is no religion in the Hebrew Bible in anything approximating an analytically useful sense.⁶ The central principles of that framework are incommensurate with the priorities and ideological foci of individuals living in first millennium BCE Southwest Asia. The division of their world into sociocultural domains, of which religion is simply one, sits at odds with the worldviews of non-Eurocentric and non-contemporary people and societies.

Unless otherwise noted, all the translations in this book are my own. I quote the Hebrew Bible (in transliteration) from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) edition of the Hebrew Bible. I also draw occasional quotations from the Rahlfs and Hanhart (2006) edition of the Septuagint, and from the NA²⁸ edition of the Christian scriptures.

⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad (2013, 17) provides the following discursive definition of religion: “RELIGION is the societal organization of knowledge about religion” (see also Neubert 2016, Hjelm 2020). This highlights the fact that the one and only feature shared among all those phenomena that are labeled religion—and only those phenomena that are labeled religion—is precisely that they are labeled religion. As a result, any analytically useful reduction to necessary and sufficient features—in other words, any *definition*—must isolate that one feature alone. Religion is whatever a given social group decides is religion.

⁶ A concern may be raised with my willingness to use mind emically (that is, from an insider’s perspective) while refusing to use religion in the same way. There are two reasons for this inconsistency. First, linguistic and conceptual proximates to the notion of the mind as the seat of cognition are frequently used in the societies I am interrogating, so the concept is not an entirely novel retrojection. The same is not true of religion. Second, I am concerned for the distortion that the application of the framework of religion has wrought within contemporary Hebrew Bible scholarship. I feel a convenient means of challenging that distortion is by demonstrating that the avoidance of the term poses no real threat to the integrity or clarity of the scholarship.

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I was also very privileged to have my research featured—thanks to Eva Mroczek's generosity and concern for early-career scholars—on the first “New PhD Showcase” of the Bible and Religions of the Ancient Near East Collective (BRANE). For that showcase, a summary of my research was circulated to registered participants beforehand, and during a live online event in October 2020, prepared responses were offered by Debra Scoggins Ballentine, Mark McEntire, Brian Rainey, and Jen Singletary. Other participants were also invited to share feedback during a Q&A portion. I am incredibly grateful for their participation and for the opportunity to have my research engaged so thoughtfully and generously in that venue. Feedback from all four presenters and other commenters has made its way into this book. (I beg forgiveness for not remembering all the individuals who offered helpful comments.) I am also grateful for the opportunity to spend some additional time after the meeting continuing the conversation with Eva, Seth Sanders, and Mark Smith. Several friends and colleagues have also read all or part of some version of this book and offered helpful encouragement, guidance, and critiques, including István Czachesz, Davina Grojnowski, Jenny Labenz, Emma Loosley, Tyson Putthoff, Brandon Shumway, Mark Thomas, Ryan Thomas, and Nicolas Wyatt. The no doubt many infelicities that remain and about which I will no doubt hear are, of course, entirely my own responsibility.

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Abbreviations

GENERAL

BCE	before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
CREDs	credibility enhancing displays
CSR	cognitive science of religion
D	Deuteronomic source
DH	Documentary Hypothesis
DN	divine name
Dtr	Deuteronomistic Source
E	Elohistic source
ET	English translation
GN	geographic name
J	Yahwistic source
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic text
Non-P	Non-Priestly (and non-Deuteronomistic) source
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
P	Priestly source
PN	personal name
PT	Pyramid Texts
SP	Samaritan Pentateuch

REFERENCE WORKS

<i>AA</i>	<i>American Anthropologist</i>
<i>AB</i>	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	Freedman, David Noel, ed. <i>The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary</i> . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.
<i>AE</i>	<i>American Ethnologist</i>
<i>AJSLL</i>	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature</i>

- ANET Pritchard, James B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- APJA *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*
- ARAM *ARAM Periodical*
- ARN *Annual Review of Neuroscience*
- ARP *Archiv für Religionspsychologie*
- BA *The Biblical Archaeologist*
- BAR *Biblical Archaeology Review*
- BASOR *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
- BBR *Bulletin for Biblical Research*
- BBS *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*
- BHS Elliger, Karl, and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
- BibInt *Biblical Interpretation*
- BiolRev *Biological Review*
- BL *Biology Letters*
- BRev *Bible Review*
- BRPBI *Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation*
- BT *The Bible Translator*
- CAD Roth, Martha T., ed. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. 26 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010.
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CD *Cognitive Development*
- ChildDev *Child Development*
- ClassAnt *Classical Antiquity*
- CogPsych *Cognitive Psychology*
- CogSci *Cognitive Science*
- COS Hallo, William W., ed. *The Context of Scripture*. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
- CRR *Critical Research on Religion*
- DAACH *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*
- DDD Van der Toorn, Karel, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds. *The Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- DevPsych *Developmental Psychology*
- DevSci *Developmental Science*
- DSD *Dead Sea Discoveries*
- EHB *Evolution and Human Behavior*
- EHS *Evolutionary Human Sciences*
- EHLI Khan, Geoffrey, ed. *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- EJJS *European Journal of Jewish Studies*

<i>EncJud</i>	Skolnik, Fred, and Michael Berenbaum, eds. <i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i> . 2nd ed. 22 vols. Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007.
<i>EP</i>	<i>Evolutionary Psychology</i>
<i>ESIC</i>	<i>Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture</i>
<i>ETR</i>	<i>Études théologiques et religieuses</i>
<i>FHN</i>	<i>Frontiers in Human Neuroscience</i>
<i>FiP</i>	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>
<i>G&H</i>	<i>Gender and History</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HeBAI</i>	<i>Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel</i>
<i>HJET</i>	<i>Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory</i>
<i>HN</i>	<i>Human Nature</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>ICS</i>	<i>Intercultural Communication Studies</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>IJPsychRel</i>	<i>International Journal for the Psychology of Religion</i>
<i>JAB</i>	<i>Journal for the Aramaic Bible</i>
<i>JA EI</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections</i>
<i>JA J</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
<i>JANER</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JARCE</i>	<i>Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCC</i>	<i>Journal of Cognition and Culture</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>JEPG</i>	<i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i>
<i>JESP</i>	<i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JISMOR</i>	<i>Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JN</i>	<i>Journal of Neuroscience</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JPSP</i>	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>
<i>JRAI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Ritual Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

- KAI* Donner, Herbert, and Wolfgang Röllig, eds. *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. 5th ed. Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002.
- KTU* Dietrich, Manfred, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, eds. *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013.
- LangCog* *Language and Cognition*
- MR* *Material Religion*
- MTSR* *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*
- Muséon* *Le Muséon: Revue d'Études Orientales*
- NA28* Aland, Barbara, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 28th rev. ed. Based on the work of Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.
- NBR* *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*
- NEA* *Near Eastern Archaeology*
- NLM* *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*
- NTT* *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*
- PBR* *Progress in Brain Research*
- PEQ* *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
- PNAS* *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*
- PPS* *Perspectives on Psychological Science*
- PS* *Psychological Science*
- PSPB* *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*
- PsychBullRev* *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*
- PsychRev* *Psychological Review*
- RAAO* *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*
- RB* *Revue biblique*
- RBB* *Religion, Brain and Behavior*
- RC* *Religion Compass*
- RE* *Review and Expositor*
- RelS* *Religious Studies*
- SAK* *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*
- SBA-IAS* *Strata: Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society*
- SJOT* *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
- SJT* *Scottish Journal of Theology*
- SPPC* *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*
- SRC* *Science, Religion and Culture*
- TA* *Tel Aviv*
- TynBul* *Tyndale Bulletin*
- TCS* *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*
- TDOT* Botterweck, G. Johannes, and Helmer Ringgren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2006.

<i>T&R</i>	<i>Thinking and Reasoning</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>VEE</i>	<i>Verbum et Ecclesia</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WO</i>	<i>Die Welt des Orients</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

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Introduction

This book is about the ways deity and divine agency are conceptualized. It focuses on the deities, divine images, and representatives in the Hebrew Bible, and will ultimately focus on the way that text itself became a channel for hosting divine agency. The book is also about categories and how we develop and use them. This includes categories like “deity” and “divine agent,” but also the conceptual categories scholars use to evaluate and to talk about them, and more specifically, the dichotomies that scholars often use to draw clear lines around those categories. It simplifies our task when we can draw hard and fast lines to distinguish deity from humanity, monotheism from polytheism, the religious from the secular, and cultic images from the deities they index.¹ However, the continued use of these dichotomies does not so much serve the interests of inquiry as it does the interests of the theological and academic structuring of power and values.² There is a saying attributed to George E. P. Box that all models are wrong, but some are useful. Many of these dichotomous models on which scholars have been relying have remained useful all these years for reasons that are often problematic. Now, certainly the model I will develop and apply will also be wrong in many ways, but this book is mostly an argument for its usefulness in helping to break some of

¹ Brett Maiden’s (2020) *Cognitive Science and Ancient Israelite Religion* is an application of the cognitive science of religion to ancient Israelite and Judahite ideologies that includes a chapter on “rethinking” the popular/official religion dichotomy, but the volume still treats “religion” and “ontology” as central categories. Maiden’s fifth chapter addresses many of the same questions as this volume, but is quite distinct in methodology and in scope. For other discussions of deity in the Hebrew Bible within a cognitive framework, see Singletary 2021; Stowers 2021.

² Note Brittany Wilson’s (2021, 6) comments regarding Christianity’s accommodation of Platonism: “Within this worldview, we find a range of related dichotomies that have their roots in Platonic thought and that often bubble to the surface in discussions of biblical embodiment (divine or otherwise). Such dichotomies include (but are not limited to): reality/representation, being/becoming, divine/human, immaterial/material, invisible/visible, form/matter, Creator/creation, soul/body.” For more thorough discussions of some of these dichotomies and their entanglement with power, see Stroumsa 2010, 2021.

the stultifying molds in which the study of deity in the Hebrew Bible has been confined.

The main question I address in this book is related to the last dichotomy listed above: how is it that cultic images and certain divine representatives can appear to be simultaneously identified *with*, as well as distinguished *from*, the deities they index? As an example, Num 10:35–36 states that as the ark of the covenant set out each day, Moses would declare, “Advance, O YHWH! Your enemies shall scatter!” As it returned each day, he would declare, “Bring back, O YHWH, the ten thousand thousands of Israel!” In 2 Sam 7:2, David laments that he dwells in a house, while “the ark of the Deity dwells within curtains.” Four verses later, YHWH responds through the prophet Nathan, stating, “From the day I brought the children of Israel up out of Egypt until this very day, I have not dwelled in a house, but have traveled around dwelling in a tent.” These passages indicate the deity’s own presence and actions were directly entangled with those of the ark.

Some cultic objects are identified with the deity, but in ways that are not authorized. Exodus 32:8, for instance, has YHWH explain that the Israelites referred to the molten calf as, “your deities, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” The text condemns worship of the calf, but the identification of the deity with a material object requires no explanation in the text, and is consistent with the treatment mentioned above of YHWH’s relationship to the ark. Similarly, there are several narratives in the Hebrew Bible in which the messenger of YHWH is identified as a messenger in one verse, but then identified as YHWH in another. For example, Exod 3:2 explains that a “messenger of YHWH” appeared to Moses, but in verse 6 this messenger declares, “I am the Deity of your father, the Deity of Abraham, the Deity of Isaac, and the Deity of Jacob.” This is different from other appearances of the messenger, such as Exod 23:20, where YHWH explicitly describes it as a separate entity: “Look, I am sending a messenger before you, to protect you along the way.”

This ostensible paradox is more implicit and ambiguous in the Hebrew Bible than it is in texts from regions like Mesopotamia, where the evidence is far more widespread and explicit and extends to texts that prescribe lengthy ritual processes by which the deity was “installed” within a wide variety of often elaborate cultic objects. Largely because of the abundance of material remains in Mesopotamia bearing on this question, it has been most thoroughly addressed by scholars working within the field of Assyriology.³ Patterns emerging from that field reveal significant progress regarding the conceptual foundations of the relationship of the deity to its cultic images, yet substantial methodological obstacles remain. As a result of the material and ostensibly artistic channels in which these phenomena

³ For engagements with this phenomenon in other fields of study, see Bird 2014 (early Christianity); Mylonopoulos 2010; Platt 2011 (ancient Greece and Rome); Davis 1997 (modern India); Bynum 2015 (Roman Catholicism); Whitehead 2013 (England).

have been preserved, those images have long been interrogated as representative art, which has failed to adequately resolve the issue (cf. Morgan 2018). Scholars increasingly acknowledge that the cultic image was thought to have been divinized and to have somehow materially “presenced” the deity itself, or manifested its presence, while still maintaining some degree of autonomy (Bahrani 2003; Herring 2013; Sonik 2015; Schaper 2019).

In 1987, Thorkild Jacobsen (1987, 18) proposed a philosophical foundation for this problem:

The contradiction of *is* and *is not* in the matter of the cult statue is so flagrant and cuts so deep that there must seem to be little hope of resolving it unless one goes to the most basic levels of understanding and attempts to gain clarity about the very fundamentals of ancient thought, about what exactly ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ meant to the ancients. We must consider, if only briefly, the ontology of the ancients, their ideas of what constituted ‘being’ and ‘reality.’⁴

Jacobsen’s observation that this ostensible paradox arises because of the disparity between our modern conceptualizations of ourselves and the world around us and those of first millennium BCE Southwest Asia touches on the root of the problem;⁵ but despite his methodological sensitivity, Jacobsen still frames the issue in terms of “ontology” and “being,” imposing modern philosophical frameworks where there is no indication they belong.⁶ Neither “ontology” nor “being” in today’s philosophical sense are anywhere discussed in the literature from ancient Southwest Asia related to the nature and function of divine images. It is not an ancient conceptual category; it is a thoroughly modern one, but twenty-first century scholarship continues to uncritically employ it. A notable exception that seems to me to be the most fruitful engagement with this issue from within Assyriology comes from Beate Pongratz-Leisten’s phenomenal essay, “Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia” (2011).⁷ Her approach, which has inspired my own in many ways, incorporates frameworks from the cognitive sciences to build on the theoretical model for distributed agency developed by Alfred Gell in his posthumously published *Art and Agency* (1998).

⁴ A. Leo Oppenheim (1977, 182) has written that it “is open to serious doubt whether we will ever be able to cross the gap caused by the differences in ‘dimensions.’” This book will demonstrate that there are significant strides that can be made toward crossing that gap.

⁵ By *conceptualize* and *conceptualization* I refer to the formation or interpretation of concepts using imagery and mental spaces that do not isometrically represent reality, but utilize idealized cognitive models or generalized mental representations. This will be discussed in more detail below.

⁶ Jacobsen goes on to describe ancient Mesopotamians as “*monists*” (Jacobsen 1987, 19).

⁷ Another notable exception is Stowers 2021.

Most of the Hebrew Bible scholarship that treats this problem is grounded in Assyriological research and similarly incorporates the frameworks of “hypostasis” (Lewis 2020, 338–92; cf. Allen 2015) and of Rudolph Otto’s (1952) concepts of the numinous (Schaper 2019, 180–81), of *mysterium* (Smith, 2001, 94–95), of the tension of the *fascinans* and the *tremendum* (Sommer 2009, 97), and the notion of the deity as “the wholly other.” The most influential engagement within Hebrew Bible scholarship has been Benjamin Sommer’s *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (2009), which formulates a conceptual model for thinking through this phenomenon that Sommer calls the “Fluidity Model.”⁸ According to this model, there are two types of “fluidity” characterizing divine selfhood in ancient Southwest Asia. The first is *fragmentation*, or the ability of divine selfhood to fragment and simultaneously occupy multiple different bodies. The second is *overlap*, or the ability of divine selves to overlap, inhabit each other, or converge (Sommer 2009, 13–19).⁹ The fluidity metaphor is intended to help us grasp the concept of the divine self being manifested in a variety of “bodies” that occupy different points in space at different or the same points in time. This fluidity makes them utterly unique, according to Sommer, who states, “For the peoples of the ancient Near East, the gods were made of a different sort of stuff, not only physically, but also ontologically.” They were “radically unlike human beings in ways that may seem baffling to people in the contemporary Western world” (Sommer 2009, 12).

Sommer has brilliantly extrapolated this framework of divine personhood from a careful interrogation of ancient Southwest Asian literature, but he happens to closely approximate a widespread anthropological framework for personhood that views the self as fundamentally relational, and frequently partible and/or permeable. Sommer briefly and perhaps incidentally engages some of the features of the framework, but rejects its relevance to his fluidity model (Sommer 2009, 195 n. 145):

Other cases outside Greece might suggest that human bodies can be seen as somewhat similar to what I describe in Mesopotamian divine bodies, but none

⁸ Other thorough analyses are Schaper 2019; Lewis 2020, 333–426; Putthoff 2020, 118–55; cf. Wagner 2019. Two papers published in the course of finalizing this book that deploy the cognitive sciences within a discussion of deity in the Hebrew Bible are Singletary 2021 and Stowers 2021.

⁹ These two types of fluidity are a bit too dichotomous in Sommer’s framework, however, and the term *bodies* reflects too modern a notion of selfhood. The sharp lines Sommers draws seem largely to be responsible for his conclusion (2009, 124) that the Priestly and Deuteronomic strata “completely rejected this conception,” and “insisted that God has only one body and one self.” As we will see in chapter 5, these authors and editors were engaged more in a nuanced renegotiation than in a rejection.

overturns the basic contrast I outline. A person who believes in transmigration of the soul would argue that a human being does have more than one body, but not at any one moment in time. In some cultures we find a belief in possession or out-of-body experiences (especially mystic unity with a divinity), albeit as exceptional experiences noteworthy precisely because the human goes beyond the bounds of the normal human body. In any event, the ancient Near Eastern cultures under discussion here do not evince such beliefs, so that they posit the fundamental contrast between human and divine bodies.

As the next chapter will demonstrate, ancient Southwest Asian societies show clear evidence of such beliefs, as do modern societies, including those within which the scientific and philosophical frameworks of the Renaissance and Enlightenment are normative. Those beliefs are socioculturally mediated variations on the intuitive partibility of the body and of certain loci of agency. Even in contemporary English-speaking cultures we speak of people in terms of relationality, as well as “being a part of us,” “taking a part of us with them,” “being there in spirit,” having their hearts in conflict with their brains, and in many other ways that reflect the underlying cognitive predispositions to relationality and the associated concepts of partibility and permeability, including—particularly in cases of deceased persons—inhabiting material media. The ability of ancient Southwest Asian deities to be present simultaneously in multiple different bodies is a difference of degrees, not of kind, that primarily emerges from widespread social demands for immediacy and presence, and from the conceptual flexibility of agents whose bodies are not otherwise available for scrutiny.

Assyriological and Hebrew Bible scholarship recognizes that these societies understood deities to in some way be able to inhabit material media and reify their presence through that media while the primary locus of their presence was understood to be located elsewhere. The scholarship also recognizes that this understanding seems to obtain in many different societies across time and space, suggesting there is some kind of underlying compulsion towards that conceptualization of deity and divine agency. A significant obstacle in this scholarship, however, is the tendency to rely for explanation on the many different emic rationalizations of those practices that emerge situationally (that is, they emerge in response to specific circumstances and situations) within the different societies in which they are found. This results in a tangled mess of accounts of deity and in the many different theoretical models that have been posited to explain the complexities of the sacred, the numinous, the hypostatic, and even of religion more broadly. This book offers a unifying theoretical framework that can account for that intuitive compulsion, can accommodate the diversity of explanations, and can also demonstrate the relationship of that intuitive compulsion to other phenomena associated with deity in the Hebrew Bible that are rarely recognized as such.

THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

The primary data pool from which I draw is the Hebrew Bible and other material remains from first millennium BCE Israel and Judah. Some preliminary remarks are warranted regarding my approach to those data. It is not my intention to forward any new theoretical models related to source criticism or the dating of the biblical texts, and so I will adopt existing models that I consider broadly representative of the state of the field. While early West Semitic poetry has an obscure *terminus post quem* (that is, earliest possible date of origin) the preponderance of evidence indicates that narrative prose developed in the regions around the highlands of Israel and Judah no earlier than the mid-ninth century BCE, which suggests that texts employing narrative prose to describe events preceding that period were committed to writing no earlier than the mid-ninth century.¹⁰ That is not to say they cannot reflect historical events from earlier periods, only that their textualization would have followed a period of oral/material transmission during which there would have been a higher likelihood of change (despite some degree of constraint imposed by different sociomaterial dynamics).¹¹ Additionally, the commitment of earlier traditions to writing would have been refracted through the lenses of the sociocultural contexts and concerns of the later authors and editors.¹² What this means for this book is that I will consider historical narratives describing periods preceding the Mesha Stele and the rise of an Israelite monarchy to have been committed to text in a later period, and therefore to have in some way reflected the rhetorical goals of the latter authors and editors. The growth of the Omride kingdom in the ninth century would have provided ample administrative support for the development of royal histories—and scholars have long pointed to indications of northern origins for

¹⁰ The Mesha Stele is the earliest example of narrative prose writing in the regions of and around early Israel and Judah (Sanders, 2010, 113–14). The reference on the Mesha Stele to Omri's oppression of Moab prior to Mesha suggests that Omri's kingdom had administrative structures at least as developed as Moab's, and therefore may have been capable itself of producing narrative prose around the same time period, though nothing survives.

¹¹ By *sociomaterial* I refer to the fundamentally material objects and channels through and with which society and sociality are created and maintained. By *oral/material* I refer not only to orally transmitted stories, but also to the association of mnemohistory with material media, such as cultic objects, buildings, geography, and even ruins. For discussions of mnemohistory, materiality, and the Hebrew Bible, see Pioske 2018; Wilson 2018; cf. Miller 2021, 189–92.

¹² See Pioske 2018, 80: "as older memories aggregate within a stream of oral tradition, they often, by necessity, adapt and cohere to 'new social and symbolic structures' within a community so that this remembered past retains its meaning and significance for those listening to a past they never experienced themselves."

several traditions (Rendsburg 1990; Finkelstein 2013, 141–51; Stahl 2021, 63–74)—but with the destruction of the Israelite kingdom in 722 BCE, and the subsequent maturation of the Judahite kingdom under Assyrian hegemony, any such literature was appropriated by whatever scribal structures were in place among officials in Jerusalem.¹³

The traditions of early Israel thus come down to us through the scribal filters of various cult centers and the Judahite royal court (Schniedewind 2004; Carr 2005; van der Toorn 2007). Some of the earliest of these likely include the charter myths of the patriarchal and exodus narratives (Finkelstein and Römer 2014, 321–22; Schmid 2018, 491–92), traditions associated with the conquest narratives (Römer 2007, 81–90), portions of the book of Judges known as the “Book of Saviors” (Römer 2007, 90–91; Knauf 2010, 140–49; Finkelstein 2017, 431–49), some prophetic literature,¹⁴ and traditions regarding the rise of Saul (Edelman 1991; Wright 2014, 35–50). Judah produced its own literature between the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, which likely included early editions of prophetic texts and its own regnal histories (Aster 2017). An additional editorial filter for many of these texts is that of the so-called “Deuteronomic school,” which refers to authors and editors who were responsible for the composition, compilation, and/or redaction of Deuteronomy (D) and the Deuteronomistic literature (Dtr), which runs from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings (Weinfeld 1972; Person 2012; Edelman 2014). The main outcome of this campaign is the book of Deuteronomy, the earliest edition of which I date to the late Neo-Assyrian period of the seventh century BCE.¹⁵ Reconstructions propose this first edition began with Deut 6:4–5, included portions of Deut 12–13 and 21–25 as its core, and concluded with the curses of chapter 28 (Römer 2007, 78–81).

The Deuteronomistic school during the Neo-Assyrian period also produced portions of what would become the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. While all these books drew in part from earlier literary traditions, and were also later edited within Neo-Babylonian (626–539 BCE) and Achaemenid (539–330 BCE) phases of Deuteronomistic production, their compilation was likely initiated by royal scribes working in Jerusalem under the reign of Josiah. Several prophetic books were composed or expanded upon between the late seventh century and the Neo-Babylonian period, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah, Habakkuk, and others (Albertz 2003; Middlemas 2007; Becking and Human 2009).

¹³ Note Pioske’s observation that “when reading stories about the early Iron Age period we find that it is events and figures associated with the central hill country, from Shechem in the north to Hebron in the south, that are most often within the purview of the biblical writers. When we move outside of these bounds the picture presented becomes somewhat more murky” (Pioske 2018, 216).

¹⁴ Portions of Hosea, for instance (Emmerson 1984; Blum 2009, 291–321).

¹⁵ The reconstruction I adopt here is based on Römer 2007, 45–106.

Another widely acknowledged source for the biblical literature is the Priestly source, or P (Guillaume 2009; Schectman and Baden 2009; Baden 2012, 169–213). This source is characterized by a transcendent view of deity and by concern for genealogy, authority, purity, and ritual law.¹⁶ Understood to begin with the creation account of Gen 1:1–2:4a, the earliest version of P is also thought to include a genealogy of Adam and of Shem, a flood account, the table of nations, portions of the books of Genesis and Exodus, Leviticus (including another source comprising Lev 17–26 known as the Holiness Code, or H), and portions of the book of Numbers (and perhaps Joshua). An original P corpus likely circulated independently,¹⁷ perhaps during the sixth or early fifth century BCE,¹⁸ but at some point, it was brought together with D and other narrative strands to produce the macronarrative of the Pentateuch.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the development of biblical literature I will address is the question of the Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) sources. According to the classical formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis (DH), J and E were two of the earliest documentary sources for the Pentateuch, and many theoretical models attribute the initial combination of the patriarchal and exodus narratives to J (Römer 2006, 24–25). They have been unstable sources in some ways, however, and questions regarding their relationship to each other and to the broader Pentateuchal macronarrative have occupied the attention of source critics for some time.¹⁹ Many—particularly German—scholars have recently forwarded the theory that the two corpora operated as independent traditions of Israelite origins until initially joined by P (Gertz, Schmid, and Witte 2002; Dozeman and Schmid 2006; Schmid 2010, 2012a). This would confine J to the early patriarchal narratives and render it less of a discrete documentary source and more of a collection of Yahwistic fragments. I think the arguments in favor of this view are strong, and so in this book I adopt the convention of referring to D, P, and either pre- or post-P sources.

I understand the rest of the biblical literature to have been composed between the Neo-Babylonian and Greco-Roman periods, with Daniel being the last, written around 164 BCE.²⁰ Some of these texts preserve traditions from earlier time

¹⁶ The concern for the temple cult is understood by many to have been introduced in a later phase of P. In this view, P “provided the chronological and narrative thread of the compilation of the Torah” (Knauf and Guillaume 2016, 183).

¹⁷ For an English translation of one proposed original P document, see Guillaume 2009, 13–30. A somewhat related attempt to delineate P is Propp 1996, 458–78.

¹⁸ For a preexilic context for P, see Milgrom 1999; Faust 2019; cf. Meyer 2010, 1–6.

¹⁹ Recent concerns about J are usually traced to Rendtorff 1976, 1977; cf. Römer 2006.

²⁰ Although the traditions still circulated separately, continued to be edited, and were characterized by a great deal of textual fluidity, as demonstrated, for instance, by the variability between MT, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint (Tov 2012, 174–90).

periods, and I will address them as the discussion warrants, but for the most part, I understand them to primarily reflect the social and ideological circumstances of the periods in which they were completed. Because these later texts will not be particularly germane to my discussion, I will address any questions of dating or sources, again, as the discussion warrants.

One main motivation for the ongoing revision, expansion, rearrangement, and reinterpretation of the texts of the Hebrew Bible in these periods is particularly relevant to this discussion, and that is the exigencies (that is, needs or demands) of social memory. The redaction of old material, the composition of new material, and the reconfiguring and reinterpreting of both socially narrativizes the circumstances and experiences of the group. This contributes to the making of meaning by renegotiating the past in light of the present and emplotting the group within the broader historical macronarrative, which reinforces identity and orients members towards desired values and goals. As Jan Assmann (2010, 14) has put it, “Memory enables us to orient ourselves in time and to form out of the stuff of time a ‘diachronic identity.’ Political myths are about forming a collective or political identity, and they achieve this by giving time the form of a narrative structure and charging this structure with values, emotions, and ideals.” Controlling that narrative emplotment also facilitates boundary maintenance and the structuring of values and power. Conceptualizations of deity and divine agency are deeply entangled with those dynamics of power, values, and identity. The same is also frequently true of the contemporary study of deity and divine agency, which brings us to the cognitive sciences.

In order to disrupt the categories and conventions I believe have prevented researchers from more productively engaging with the problem of deities and their agents in the Hebrew Bible, and to address the frequent methodological myopia of a purely historical-critical approach, my approach in this book will be informed by insights from cognitive linguistics and the cognitive science of religion.²¹ The material remains of ancient Israel and Judah that bear on the question of deities and divine agency are material products of mental representations within socio-historical contexts. Historians have long worked under the unstated assumption that “understanding arises simply by situating mental products in their context” (Martin 2013, 16), but the cognitive sciences have made clear that environmental input alone is not sufficient to determine mental output—the mind is not a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). The shared cognitive features of humanity’s evolutionary history contribute, along with top-down environmental affordances, influences,

²¹ While the cognitive science of religion is only beginning to be applied to the study of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Maiden 2020), Ellen van Wolde (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2013) has been productively applying the insights of cognitive linguistics for years. For the use of prototype theory to interrogate deity in relation to divine kingship in Mesopotamia, see Selz 2008.

and constraints, to the production, direction, and structuring of those outputs. Both configurations are critical to a more precise understanding of those outputs. Because our reconstruction of the ancient world unavoidably requires theoretical leaps over the gaps between lived experiences and material remains (and particularly texts), a more careful and robust methodological bridging of that gap is critical to advancing the field.²²

Before describing my approach in more detail, a couple of caveats must be noted. The cognitive sciences are based on research with living informants, and this book begins from the assumption that the findings of experimentation today are more or less transferable to ancient minds. No available empirical data verify or falsify this assumption as of yet, but several considerations lend strong support to it. For instance, the main cognitive features that will be identified as central to the development of my thesis are understood to be products of evolutionary adaptations from very early in, and even prior to, the rise of modern humans. The conditions that give rise to many of those features have not changed since then: humans still give live birth to infants whose growth requires extensive support over several years from human persons who physically and personally interact with them within a broader social group. Additionally, many of the widespread mental outputs identified by scholars today as culturally mediated products of the relevant shared cognitive features are abundant in the material remains of first millennium BCE Southwest Asia, at least provisionally suggesting the presence and influence of those shared cognitive features. As Luther H. Martin has observed, “Given the scale of evolutionary time and change, it is reasonable to conclude that our cognitive capacities, like our behavioral biases, have remained significantly unaltered since the emergence of modern humans by the late Pleistocene Era, some 60,000 to 50,000 years ago” (Martin 2013, 16; cf. Wynn and Coolidge 2009).

A related complication is the disproportionate use of experiment participants from societies that are “WEIRD,” or “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic” (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). College students in and from Eurocentric societies have long provided the vast majority of the data used to construct psychological theories and models, based on the untested assumption that their perspectives are universal. The experiences of people in these societies can differ wildly from those of societies from the other ends of those continua, which includes the societies of ancient Southwest Asia. While our underlying cognitive architecture is often consistent, mental outputs differ when cognition gets shone through the various cognitive filters those experiences afford us. While this has problematized much older data, subsequent cognitive research has more consistently incorporated informants from societies that do not fall exclusively under

²² For a cognitive perspective on text as a technology that facilitated the formation of Jewish culture, see Levy 2012.

that rubric, and I have tried to construct my theoretical framework on that more recent research.

For this book, one of the most important insights I draw from the cognitive sciences is the influence of automatic and unconscious cognitive processes on our conscious and reflective cognition. In simpler terms, our subconscious thought precedes our conscious thought and can and does influence and even conflict with it. Within the cognitive science of religion, this insight is most commonly manifested in the concept of “dual-process cognition,” which is usually and unfortunately represented as a dichotomy that divides “intuitive cognition” (quick, automatic, linked to the mind’s “default settings”) apart from “reflective cognition” (slow, conscious, open to contextual influence; Evans and Stanovich 2013; De Neys 2014; Morgan 2014; White 2021, 39–41). Many scholars have identified a variety of cognitive processes underlying our cognition that can straddle both sides of this proposed dichotomy (Glöckner and Witteman 2010; Mugg 2016; Grayot 2020). My interest in this model is focused on the capacity for cognition to operate unconsciously, which has been demonstrated by an array of experimental data, as has the potential for such unconscious cognition to influence and to conflict with more reflective cognition (Kelemen, Rottman, and Seston 2013; Järnefelt, Canfield, and Kelemen 2015; Järnefelt et al., 2019). In cases of such conflict in a person’s cognition, they may apply reflective reasoning to the justification, explanation, or elaboration of the intuitive response (I refer to this as “rationalizing”), or they may employ reflective reasoning to revise or override it (I refer to this as “decoupling”).

This cognitive conflict again raises a rather significant impediment to the study of deity that was briefly discussed above, namely the widespread scholarly prioritization of reflective and emic explanations in reconstructing the fundamentals of thought regarding deity from the available texts.²³ The overwhelming majority of emic explanations of deity—past and present—represent reflective reasoning about deity. Such reasoning, however, tends to be influenced by identity politics and power structures, and it is less likely to be relevant to the origins of the deity concepts. One result of the centering of this reflective reasoning is an insistence on treating the conceptualization of and engagement with deities and divine images as something unique, transcendent, and/or ineffable.²⁴ This may

²³ This prioritization obviously extends beyond just accounts of deity concepts. Theological explanations for ritual also tend to represent rather ad hoc rationalizations that serve the structuring of power and often have little to do with the historical and cognitive underpinnings of ritual acts (cf. Whitehouse 2021, 40–46). As Claire White (2021, 40) notes, “belief is often a poor predictor of behavior.”

²⁴ Note Sommer’s suggestion that “an interpreter should first of all at least consider the possibility that we can understand a religious text as manifesting religious intuitions that are essentially timeless” (Sommer 2009, 97). The next chapter will demonstrate that these

obscure our attempt to identify influences underlying their transmission, change, and elaboration (Boyer 2012).

Until reflective explanations become salient (usually because of strong social institutions), deity concepts tend to develop and circulate on the “folk” level, and to be more closely tethered to intuitive reasoning. Additionally, reflective explanations are often situationally emergent and contingent on power structures. Those explanations may become authoritative and govern subsequent accounts, or they may be altered or abandoned because of changing circumstances, but deity concepts cannot escape the gravitational pull of intuitive reasoning.²⁵ To use the most salient *reflective* explanations to account for the production, elaboration, or transmission of the concept is to put the cart firmly before the horse. Unfortunately, that has been the trend in many scholarly accounts of deity and divine agency.²⁶ The cognitive science of religion, on the other hand, gives significant weight to the *intuitive* explanation. This is thought to hit closer to the cognitive roots of cross-cultural patterns of thought and behavior, and this makes for a more solid foundation for explanation than does privileging the far more socially and historically contingent reflective structuring of knowledge. I am by no means suggesting that these cognitive roots are the only relevant sources of explanation, that they should always take unilateral priority over those more socially contingent modes of knowledge, or that the latter do not merit study in their own right. I am suggesting those roots have been neglected for far too long, and that they can facilitate a great deal of progress.

One of the outcomes of the priority of our intuitive cognition is that our minds mediate our perception of the world around us, and this extends to our senses (it’s what makes most optical illusions work), but even to how we *think* about ourselves and the world around us (cf. Ramachandran 2011). This leads to an important insight: our perception and experience of the world is the result not just of the passive processing of stimuli, but also a projection of experience. Our minds

intuitions are actually the same intuitions responsible for our conceptualizations of ourselves and the rest of the world around us. The assumption that there are intuitions unique to religion is a distorting framework.

²⁵ Justin Barrett and Frank Keil (1996, cf. Barrett 1999), for instance, have shown that when reasoning about the activity of deity, people most commonly default to a thoroughly anthropomorphic conceptualization, which is more intuitive. When primed regarding the particular theological orthodoxies they endorsed, the appeals to anthropomorphism were reduced.

²⁶ It seems to me this is particularly common in the study of early christology. This scholarship frequently gives priority of place to rationalizations attributed to the authors of the biblical texts, which serves the interests and power structures of scholars operating within the perception of a shared tradition. This seems to me to be a brand of what is referred to in the study of religion as “protectionism.” For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon, see Young 2019.

take a fraction of a second to process stimuli, but there are sometimes circumstances in which that gap can be the difference between life and death. As a result, our minds have evolved to cover that gap by using available clues to project expectations onto our perceptions (Bubic, von Cramon, and Schubotz 2010). This evolutionary adaptation can be exploited for entertainment purposes:

A
BIRD
IN THE
THE BUSH

If you read “A BIRD IN THE BUSH,” your mind skipped the second occurrence of “THE” on the fourth line. Not everyone will be tripped up by this illustration, but expectations can trip us up enough that it’s one of the main reasons it’s good to have others proofread our writing.

A theoretical model known as “predictive coding” describes the human brain as “a statistical organ that constantly tests its own hypotheses about the world through an ongoing process of error minimization” (Anderson 2019, 71).²⁷ Predictive coding suggests the mind’s experiences in the past inform expectations (or predictions) regarding the sensory input most likely to come from its environment.²⁸ These expectations inform those projections that cover gaps in processing time and in the reliability of sensory input. When that reliability is low, such as in darkness, expectations drawn from prior experience can dominate perception (and imagination), while the sensory input will usually dominate when it is more reliable and precise.²⁹ The mind’s model of its own body and its environment, seen and unseen, and expectations going forward, are revised and corrected in accordance with the input received. This feature of our cognition will have particular significance in the next chapter’s discussion of our sensitivity to the presence of agents in the world around us.

²⁷ On this model, see further Hohwy, 2013; Clark et al., 2013; van Elk and Aleman 2017; Van Eyghen 2018; Anderson et al. 2019.

²⁸ See Uffe Schjødt’s description (2019, 364): “Predictive coding elegantly explains how the brain uses Bayesian inference to minimize the energy spent on perception and cognition. Mental representations consist of top-down models based on prior experience which are constantly compared with bottom-up information from the senses. If prediction errors are detected, the brain corrects and updates its models in order to minimize prediction error in the future.”

²⁹ This theory’s prioritization of domain-general cognitive processes instead of domain-specific (or “modular”) processes offers a helpful corrective to the salience of modularity within CSR. Cognitive linguistics developed out of opposition to the modular theories of generative grammar (Lakoff 1987a, 582–85).

While these insights help us better understand the cognitive processes involved in the production, elaboration, and transmission of deity concepts, it's not as simple as drawing a straight line from those cognitive processes to the biblical texts as we have them today. In addition to the fact that the Hebrew Bible represents the repeatedly edited and decontextualized writings of a tiny minority of members of elite scribal classes, they are overwhelmingly instruments of propaganda intended to further the authors' and editors' own rhetorical goals. As a result, they reflect carefully curated perspectives with a broad spectrum of proximities to actual lived experiences today. To more carefully bridge the gap between cognition and text, and to help navigate the complexities of biblical rhetoric, this book also incorporates insights from cognitive linguistics.

The foundational principle of cognitive linguistics is that language is not an autonomous faculty that operates independently of our cognition, but is one of many integrated functions *of* that cognition. In other words, language is not an independent tool we just pick up and manipulate. It originates in and is governed by our experiences within our cognitive ecologies—it is an outgrowth of our individual experiences with cognition.³⁰ Perhaps the most important insight that results from this principle is that linguistic meaning is contingent on our cumulative embodied experiences. We construct meaning from language because we have experience with usage in contexts, not because words, phrases, or sentences have inherent or autonomous semantic value. They do not. Words and texts have no inherent meaning. Meaning is generated in, and is confined to, the mind of the hearer, reader, or viewer, and based on the interpretive lenses their cumulative embodied experiences afford.

Among many other things, this insight helps us to better understand how what we consider theologically problematic biblical texts could be preserved by theologically sensitive editors and redactors. A text composed to communicate a perspective that later circumstances rendered theologically problematic need not necessarily be revised or excised in order to resolve the problem, since it carries no meaning independent of the hearers, readers, or viewers. As the shared texts of Judahite societies arrogated more and more authority, their alteration became an increasingly sensitive issue. All that was usually required to resolve theologically thorny issues, however, was for the consumers to bring interpretive frameworks to the text that facilitated an alternative reading. In many instances, powerful social institutions can propagate and enforce such alternative readings without making any changes to the texts at all, either by slightly revising entirely distinct texts, or by composing entirely new texts. As one example from the Christian scriptures, Jas 2:24 seems to represent a direct challenge to Rom 3:28. The author

³⁰ William Croft and D. Alan Cruse (2004, 3–4) explain, “categories and structures in semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology are built up from our cognition of specific utterances on specific occasions of use.”

of Romans states, “for we determine that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law” (*logizometha gar dikaiousthai pistei anthrōpon xōris ergōn nomou*), while the author of James asserts, “you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (*horate hoti ex ergōn dikaioutai anthrōpos kai ouk ek pisteōs monon*). James 2:21–22 also directly challenges the example of Abraham evoked by Paul in Rom 4:2–3. While Martin Luther dismissed James as an “epistle of straw” (*strohene Epistel*) in the introduction to his 1522 translation of the Bible, subsequent Protestant readers have largely reconciled the two texts not by altering them, but by imposing a new interpretive lens that flips the relationship of faith and works and rereads works as the fruits or the manifestation of faith. According to this reading, the author of James and the author of Romans are actually in perfect agreement, and the second chapter of James is just explaining that one’s justification is still achieved by faith alone and only *manifested to others* through works. Readers of the biblical texts are not as confined as we frequently assume to the readings that we find most likely. In chapter 5 I will suggest that a passage in Exodus was composed precisely to provide an alternative interpretive lens for other problematic passages that scholars still have not managed to resolve to widespread satisfaction.

In addition to being confined to the minds of hearers, readers, and viewers, cognitive linguistics suggests that meaning is conceptual, or based on concepts, which can be described as “a person’s idea of what something in the world is like” (Dirven and Verspoor 2004, 13). Concepts are not coextensive with linguistic expressions; they are the semantic structures conventionally indexed by those expressions. To facilitate the more efficient and consistent construal of conceptual content, our minds create and deploy basic metaphorical frameworks called “image schemas” (Hampe 2005; Mandler and Cánovas 2014). These are “abstract, preconceptual structures that emerge from our recurrent experiences of the world” (Kövecses 2020, 9). They serve to give structure to more developed or abstract concepts. A very basic example is the UP-DOWN schema, which is used to map abstract concepts against a vertical spatial relationship.³¹ This schema may derive intuitively from the upright stance and gait of healthy and abled humans. It appears to be nearly universal, and a vast array of abstractions is intuitively mapped against it to produce what are called conceptual metaphors (Kövecses 2020; Nyord 2009, 6–23).³²

The following are common English-language examples based on the UP-DOWN schema:³³

³¹ I follow the convention here of putting the names of image schemas and conceptual metaphors in small caps.

³² Sometimes the terms *image schema* and *conceptual metaphor* are conflated (cf. Lakoff 1987b, 219–22).

³³ The examples here are drawn primarily from Saeed 2003, 347.

good is up; bad is down
 “Things are looking *up*”
 “Well, this is an all-time *low*”

happy is up; sad is down
 “My spirits are *up*”
 “He’s feeling *down*”

virtue is up; depravity is down
 “She has *high* standards”
 “I wouldn’t *stoop* that *low*”

control is up; subjugation is down
 “She’s in a *superior* role”
 “They are *under* my control”

Another very basic image schema that research suggests develops intuitively in preverbal infant cognition is the CONTAINER schema (Mandler 1992; Tilford 2017, 17–23), which leads to the widespread conceptual metaphor THE BODY IS A CONTAINER. According to this metaphor, the skin functions as a boundary to keep everything inside on the inside, and everything outside on the outside. As we will see in the next chapter, this conceptual metaphor leads intuitively to the perception that the self is contained inside the body (and most commonly located in the area of the head, the chest, or the abdomen). With this understanding of the relationship of conceptual metaphors to cognition, we can more confidently reconstruct some of the intuitions, assumptions, and foundations of thought that were likely held by ancient writers about the person, about the world, and about the former’s place within the latter. This will be particularly relevant to the discussion of personhood in the first chapter.

Prototype theory is another important framework that will inform this book’s engagement with conceptual categories (Rosch 1973, 1975; Lakoff 1987a; Taylor 2003; Geeraerts 2006). According to this theory, the human mind does not intuitively learn or use categories according to the classical Aristotelian approach of a binary set of necessary and sufficient features (the foundational approach of most dictionaries).³⁴ That is a distorting framework. Experimental data indicate that conceptual categories are not strictly binary, but can be internally graded—that is, there are “better” and “worse” members of a category—and tend to lack

³⁴ John Taylor provides a summary of the Aristotelian method of categorization, and he identifies four basic assumptions inherent to it: (1) “Categories are defined in terms of a conjunction of necessary and sufficient features,” (2) “Features are binary,” (3) “Categories have clear boundaries,” and (4) “All members of a category have equal status” (Taylor 2003, 21–22).

natural boundaries. Attention is focused inward on the center of the category and on its prototypical members, not outward on its boundaries or on the total membership. As a result, categories do not develop and are not learned through the delineation of the boundaries, but through experiences with the prototypical members of a category.³⁵ For instance, you can almost certainly distinguish furniture from non-furniture, but can you define “furniture”?³⁶ Can you list the widely accepted necessary and sufficient features? We understand a category because we have experience with items identified as members of it, not because we memorize lists of features that delineate the category.³⁷ Boundaries tend to arise rather arbitrarily as a need arises for them, meaning those boundaries are often fuzzy, arbitrary, and/or debatable, and are often the products of attempts to structure values and power.³⁸ Rather than learning and using categories based on necessary and sufficient features, prototype theory suggests that categories are learned and used based on the perception of some manner of similarity to a prototype. These prototypes are not usually individual members of a category, but cognitive exemplars or idealized conceptualizations that arise from experiences with the category.³⁹ While this theory will inform my engagement with all the conceptual categories discussed throughout this book (and is why I do not define any terms), it will be a particular focus of my discussion in chapter 3 regarding the conceptualization of deity in the Hebrew Bible. Among other things, prototype

³⁵ The “is a hotdog a sandwich” debate shows how prioritizing necessary and sufficient features can result in (mostly) humorous distortions of the ways categories are used.

³⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein 1958, §1.68: “How is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word ‘game.’)”

³⁷ Ask someone on the street in San Antonio to describe a “boot” in as much detail as possible and they’ll almost certainly describe a cowboy boot. Ask someone on the street in Liverpool, UK, and they’ll almost certainly describe an army boot, if not the trunk of a car. The different experiences with the category “boot” between these two societies will produce different conceptualizations.

³⁸ For example, there is a lot at stake in debates about what does or does not constitute a deity, a religion, or even a woman, which is one of several reasons the definitions are so contested. For an example of sociological research on what’s at stake in how the concept of “racism” is defined, see Unzueta and Lowery 2008.

³⁹ Describing developments in the field of prototype theory, Patrizia Violi (2000, 107) states, “It became clear that it was not possible, at least for semantic applications, to think of the prototype as the concrete instance of the most prototypical member of any given category, and consequently as a real individual. Instead, it was necessary to turn it into a mental construal: an abstract entity made up of prototypical properties. In this way the prototype, being the result of a mental construction, frees itself from any concrete evidence, and as such may well never be actualized in reality as any real instance.”

theory allows us to acknowledge and engage with overlap and integration at the intersection of distinct conceptual categories, rather than insist on the strict and clear binaries that are prominent primarily because of academic convenience rather than analytical value.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

My first chapter constructs a theoretical model for the nature and origins of deity concepts. Rather than begin with contemporary models of deity, however, it begins with a theoretical model for the origins of deity concepts drawn from the cognitive science of religion. I will then argue that deity concepts originated in elaborations on the intuitive conceptualization of human persons, including deceased kin.⁴⁰ The most important function of deities within this framework relate to the facilitation of social cohesion through full access to strategic information, through social monitoring, and through the provision, via ritual, of opportunities for costly signaling and credibility enhancing displays. Cultic media will be shown to be critical not only to the materialization and transmission of deity concepts, but also to the presencing of deities and their agency.

The second chapter treats the material encounter of deity and divine in ancient Southwest Asia, applying the theoretical framework developed in chapter 1 to the material remains of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, and finally ancient Israel and Judah. This will demonstrate the heuristic value of that framework and set the stage for the discussion in subsequent chapters of YHWH's presencing media. Chapters 3 and 4 will address deity in the Hebrew Bible, employing insights from cognitive linguistics to bridge the gap between the material and phenomenological aspects of deity and divine agency and their representation in the biblical texts. Chapter 3 will explore the contours and boundaries of the semantic field of the generic concept of deity. Chapter 4 will then interrogate YHWH's profile as an instantiation of that generic concept. Deprivileging YHWH's conceptualizations by examining them through the frameworks of generic deity will reveal their roots in that generic framework, and also show that the more distinctive aspects of YHWH's divine profile do not represent conceptual revolutions, but incremental elaborations on generic features and functions.

In the fifth chapter I interrogate YHWH's own divine agents, focusing on the ark of the covenant and the *kābôd* (traditionally translated "glory"). By tracing the developmental trajectory of these agents, this interrogation will demonstrate that there was no revolutionary paradigm shift that resulted in the abandonment of Israelite or Judahite presencing media. Rather, the nature of those media was

⁴⁰ My discussion will focus on the cognitive science of religion. A related discussion from archaeological and anthropological perspectives, with several points of contact, is found in Wunn and Grojnowski 2016.

incrementally revised to serve the changing perspectives, circumstances, and needs of the elite. The chapter begins with the ark of the covenant, which is the closest thing in the Hebrew Bible to an authorized Yahwistic cultic image. The chapter will argue that it paralleled, in form and function, shrine models that housed and mobilized small divine images. The chapter then moves on to the *kābôd*, or “glory” of YHWH, which in its earliest iterations represented the very body of YHWH, but later became compartmentalized as a partible divine agent that both presenced the deity and also obscured its nature.

Chapter 6 turns its attention to the enigmatic messenger of YHWH, who in several biblical narratives is alternatively distinguished *from* YHWH and also identified *as* YHWH. This phenomenon closely parallels the similar identification elsewhere in ancient Southwest Asia of divine images as simultaneously the deity and *not* the deity. The chapter will identify three main approaches to accounting for this conflation of identities, concluding that the theory of the interpolation of the word *messenger* in these narratives best accounts for the data. The theoretical framework developed earlier in the book regarding the intuitive communicability of loci of agency will account for the survival of these seemingly paradoxical narratives. Exodus 23:20–21 appeals to that framework when it attributes divine prerogatives to the messenger of YHWH in virtue of the messenger’s possession of one of the main loci of YHWH’s agency: the divine name. The remainder of the chapter will explore the use of the *šem*, or “name,” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to presence the deity, and particularly in the Jerusalem temple.

In chapter 7, I will examine the further textualization of YHWH’s presencing media. I will argue that the de facto centralization of cultic worship following the invasion of Sennacherib and the later loss of the Jerusalem temple left a void in the sociomaterial presencing of YHWH that was quickly filled with inscriptions, amulets, and the texts of the Torah. Amulets like the Ketef Hinnom inscriptions demonstrate the private apotropaic (that is, for warding off evil) use of texts as presencing media. Meanwhile, in narratives from the authoritative literature, versions of the Torah were written upon more traditional cultic media like stelai (that is, standing stones, e.g., Deut 27:1–10). In this way, texts that not only bore the divine name, but also the first-person speech of the deity, merged with and activated the older presencing media. In later periods, these texts were rhetorically democratized as authoritative literature. They would also prescribe the installation of amulets containing portions of some Torah texts on the posts of their doorways (similar to the placement of stelai at city gates), as well as their wearing as emblems on the forehead. In this way, the Torah replaced icons and divine images, not by way of rejection, but assimilation.

The conclusion will summarize the most important findings of the book, including the nature of deity concepts as elaborations on the intuitive conceptualization of partible and permeable persons, the divine/human continuum, and the

relationship of presencing media to communicable divine agency in the Hebrew Bible. I will also highlight the productivity and robustness of the theoretical frameworks developed in the book and discuss their applicability to other aspects of the study of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the study of deity beyond the Hebrew Bible. A brief appendix following the conclusion will also discuss the relevance of the messenger of YHWH and the divine name to early perspectives on Jesus's relationship to the God of Israel.

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