



The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel

BENJAMIN D. SOMMER

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THE BODIES OF GOD AND THE WORLD OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

In *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Benjamin D. Sommer investigates the notion of God's body and God's self in ancient Israel, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. He uncovers a lost ancient Near Eastern perception of divinity according to which an essential difference between gods and humans was that gods had more than one body and fluid, unbounded selves. Though the dominant strains of biblical religion rejected it, a monotheistic version of this theological intuition is found in some biblical texts. Later Jewish and Christian thinkers inherited this ancient way of thinking; ideas such as the *sefirot* in kabbalah and the trinity in Christianity represent a late version of this theology. This book challenges the distinction between monotheism and polytheism, as this notion of divine fluidity is found in both polytheistic cultures (Babylonia, Assyria, Canaan) and monotheistic ones (biblical religion, Jewish mysticism, Christianity), whereas it is absent in some polytheistic cultures (classical Greece). *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* has important repercussions not only for biblical scholarship and comparative religion but also for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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The Bodies of God and the World
of Ancient Israel

BENJAMIN D. SOMMER

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521518727

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First published in print format 2009

ISBN-13 978-0-511-59616-2 eBook (NetLibrary)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-51872-7 Hardback

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לאשתי האהובה
חנה בת אברהם ושרה
אשת חן תתמוך כבוד

For Jennifer

On our marriage becoming a "bar mitzvah"



להמשיל לו להחבירה . . .
גדל-כח וגבורה

והוא אחד ואין שני
בלי חבור בלי פרווד

(מתוך אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם, נוסח ע"מ)

כגונא דאנון מתיחדין לעלא באחד, אופי הכי איהי אתיחדת לתתא ברזא דאחד
למהוי עמהון לעלא חד לקבל חד . . . והא אוקימנא רזא דה' אחד ושמו אחד
(מתוך זוהר פרשת תרומה קל"ה ע"א)

המשילוך ברוב חזיונות, הנך אחד בכל דמיונות
(מתוך שיר הכבוד)

He is one and there is no other
To compare to Him or to combine with Him. . .
Without merger, without fragmentation,
Great in power and in might.
(From the hymn *Adon Olam*)

Just as they achieve unity above by means of one,
So, too, She achieves unity below by means of the secret of one,
So that She corresponds with those above, one matching one;
. . . And we have already established the secret
of "the LORD is one and His name one."

(From the Zohar to *Terumah*)

They portrayed You through comparisons in many visions,
But in all your images You are one.

(From the hymn *Shir Hakavod*)

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Preface

I wrote this book for several groups of people, who will want to read it in rather different ways. My audience, I hope, will include scholars of the Hebrew Bible; historians of religion; specialists in various areas of Jewish thought, including especially scholars of Jewish mysticism; Jewish and Christian theologians; scholars of comparative literature who are interested in the biblical foundations of the Western literary tradition; clergy and religious educators who have a particular interest in scripture; and, in the case of the first chapter, Assyriologists, Ugaritologists, and classicists. Further, I know from frequent teaching outside the university that a happy few laypeople engage in Bible study that is at once intellectually rigorous and religiously sensitive, and this band of readers, too, may find this book worthwhile.

Because these audiences come to this book from diverse backgrounds, I try not to assume that my readers possess a great deal of knowledge in any particular subject. An idea that requires no explanation for an Assyriologist needs to be unpacked for a theologian; a concept that is well known to a biblicist may be completely novel to a student of Lurianic kabbalah. Therefore, I gloss what to some will be familiar terms, and I spend a few extra sentences introducing a topic here and there. I trust that specialists will not be bothered if they find themselves having to skim through a few passages to get to the interesting stuff a page later. Certain technical issues are crucial for the defense of my argument in the eyes of experts (“How can Sommer possibly say this in light of what Smith demonstrated in his article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* in 1952?!”) but uninteresting to everybody else. I address these issues in the endnotes, some of which are quite long. The scholars to whom they are addressed will know when they should pause to study something at the back of the book, while other readers will be happiest ignoring the endnotes entirely.

One issue I do not pause to discuss involves the composition of biblical texts. I assume my readers know something about the consensus with which all modern biblical scholars agree: To wit, most books of the Hebrew Bible, like many literary compositions from the ancient Near East, are anthologies of older texts and traditions. These anthologies were brought together by anonymous editors, who sometimes made substantial additions of their own to the traditions they passed on. The Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses, according to the most well-known theory (whose specifics have come under attack in the past few decades, but whose broad outlines still command widespread assent), was put together from three or four

main blocks of material: texts composed by priests who officiated at the Jerusalem Temple and perhaps elsewhere (we biblical scholars refer to this block of material as “P”), the bulk of the Book of Deuteronomy (“D”), and various other traditions (sometimes termed “J” and “E”; many scholars regard these as closely related and therefore refer to this material as “JE”). Some specialists nowadays disagree with the classic theory especially as it pertains to the J and E texts, but the assignment of verses among P, D, and the rest of the material, whatever one calls it, is a matter of consensus, quibbles here and there notwithstanding. For the purposes of the argument in this book, it is this basic division that matters. (Scholars who object to my use of “J” and “E” could easily substitute some other sign used by more recent critics for non-P, non-D material, such as “K^D”; my argument would remain unaffected.) Similarly, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings include earlier texts that were brought together by a group of editors called “the Deuteronomists” (“Dtr”), who also composed a great deal of the material found in these books. I use the abbreviations J, E, P, D, and Dtr throughout this study. Numerous scholarly questions related to the composition of biblical texts – for example, the extent to which the Dtr editors were also responsible for parts of the Book of Deuteronomy itself, whether E ever existed on its own or is merely a supplement to J, whether one ought to differentiate between J and E at all, and whether P is older than D or the other way around – have no bearing on my thesis and will not detain us here. To find out more about what lies behind these letters, readers who are curious can consult any of a number of works: academic and denominational study Bibles, introductions to biblical literature, articles in various dictionaries, and Web sites (though one should use the last resource carefully).

Here are a few additional matters of terminology:

The God of ancient Israel, like all deities of the ancient Near East, has a personal name, spelled in Hebrew with the four letters *yod*, *hey*, *waw*, and *hey*. Most translations render this name in English as “LORD,” in uppercase letters, to differentiate it from the noun “Lord,” but by rendering a personal name with this noun, these translations miss something crucial in the original text. I prefer simply to transliterate this name. Following Jewish tradition, however, I never pronounce this name out loud, instead substituting some other Hebrew word, such as “*Adonay*” or “*Hashem*” wherever the four-letter name appears in a text, and as a sort of precaution I do not spell it with its vowels either. Therefore, this name always appears as “Yhwh” in this book, even when I am citing the title of an article or book that spells it differently.

The word “Israel” has at least three meanings in the Bible and biblical studies: It is another name for the patriarch Jacob; it refers to the whole nation descended from him; and it refers to the northern kingdom (as distinct from the southern kingdom of Judah) that came into existence after the death of David’s son Solomon. I always use it in this book in its most expansive sense, to refer to all the nation

descended from Jacob. I specify “northern” and “southern” when I need to refer to the two kingdoms or to the Israelite groups native to the one or the other area.

This book focuses on the anthology known to English-speaking Jews as “the Bible” and to English-speaking Christians as “the Old Testament.” I use the neutral, nondenominational term “the Hebrew Bible.” For the noun neutrality is easy, but for the adjective it is rather cumbersome, and so the adjective “biblical” in this book always refers to the Hebrew Bible.

The words “Northwest Semitic” in this book refer to the closely related and often interconnected peoples and languages variously known as Canaanite, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic, among others. The Israelites, too, are a Northwest Semitic people (even though a crucial core of their ancestors were probably of Mesopotamian descent), and their language, Hebrew, is a dialect of Canaanite. But for convenience, I use the words “Northwest Semitic” to refer especially to Northwest Semitic peoples other than the Israelites. In doing so, I do not mean to imply that Israelite culture was completely separate from the other Northwest Semites; on the contrary, a major point of this study is that one can recover the lost Israelite theology that concerns us only by reading Israelite literature within its Northwest Semitic context. Rather, my use of “Northwest Semitic” here is merely a convenience, because it is easier to type these two words than constantly to type “Canaanite, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, Amorite, Aramaic, and other related non-Israelite cultures.”

Translations in this book are my own, unless I specifically indicate otherwise in an endnote. I refer to biblical verses using the numbering system found in the Hebrew (Masoretic) text. On occasion, the numbering in some English translations varies by one or two verses.

Acknowledgments

I began work on this book in the 1998–9 academic year during a sabbatical supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University, and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation. I wrote a first draft of several chapters during a teaching leave in 2002 sponsored by the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, to whose director at the time, Jacob Lassner, I am pleased to express my thanks. I completed the bulk of the work during another sabbatical sponsored by Northwestern University’s Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences in the 2006–7 academic year. My gratitude goes to all these institutions.

I spent the sabbaticals in 1998–9 and 2006–7 as a visiting scholar at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The Department of Bible there provided gifts of collegiality, conversation, and friendship that profoundly enriched my work and fostered my growth as a scholar. In 2006–7, I was also a visiting Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. There I found an atmosphere for learning, thinking, and writing about Judaism that I can only describe as ideal. I owe a great deal to both institutions and to the people who facilitated my time there: Isaiah Gafni, David Hartman, Donniel Hartman, Israel Knohl, Baruch Schwartz, Debbie Sinclair, Emanuel Tov, and Yair Zakovitch. The Hebrew University’s Bible Department and the Shalom Hartman Institute represent two areas to which I hope this book contributes: respectively, the historical/philological study of biblical and ancient Near Eastern religion, and the ongoing tradition that is Jewish thought or, more simply, Torah. Both institutions have ensured that the words of the eighth-century prophets Isaiah and Micah, *כי מציון תצא תורה* (“For Torah is coming out of Zion”), are as true today as they have ever been.

I write these lines in my office at Northwestern University during the last few weeks I am to spend in it before moving to my new position on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. For fourteen years, Northwestern has been an extraordinary intellectual home. As a member of its Department of Religion and the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies there, I have been unusually fortunate, enjoying a type of collegiality that most academics only dream about. It is an honor to express my gratitude to my colleagues in Evanston and to Northwestern’s administration, which has been exceedingly gracious to me personally and to the study of religion and of Judaism.

This book was written in Nota Bene, which is quite simply the world's finest academic word-processing and database suite. By anticipating pretty much all my needs, the folk over at Nota Bene made every stage of research, writing, and preparing for publication much, much easier. Over the years Steve Siebert and Anne Putnam have been unfailingly prompt and friendly whenever I had a question. No superlatives suffice to praise the high quality and personalized nature of their customer support.

Funding for preparing the indexes came from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation. Various research-related expenses were borne by the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University. Additional expenses in the final preparation of the galleys were covered by the Jewish Theological Seminary. It is a pleasure to thank all these institutions.

Andy Beck and Jason Przybylski at Cambridge University Press have been friendly, patient, and a pleasure to work with. The index was prepared by Jim Diggins. My thanks go to him, and to Ken Karpinski, who edited the book for Cambridge. Edward Silver and Adam Jackson provided valuable research assistance as I worked on the book.

The cover art by the late Israeli sculptor Dov Feigin is used with the permission of his son, Gavriel Feigin, who has been very helpful not only in allowing me to use the image of "Pesel Bamidbar" but also in helping me to locate a suitable photo of the sculpture. I am pleased to express my thanks to Ellen Hotzblatt, an artist who frequently works with biblical themes, for drawing the illustration of the Taanakh cult stand that appears in the Appendix.

While writing this book, I have benefited from conversation with many friends and colleagues. Encouragement and comments from Richard Kieckhefer, Shalom Paul, and Baruch Schwartz have been especially important to me both intellectually and personally. Detailed suggestions from Richard Tupper and Joan Katz enormously improved this book. Useful feedback came from Tzvi Abusch, Gary Anderson, Michael Balinsky, Erhard Blum, Aryeh Cohen, H. Jeffrey Hodges, Wayne Horowitz, Jonathan Judaken, Israel Knohl, Yair Lorberbaum, Shaul Magid, Barbara Newman, Alexander Rofé, Seth Sanders, Stuart Sarbacker, Michael Segal, Edward Silver, Aaron Tugendhaft, and Yair Zakovitch. I profited from the readers' reports Cambridge University Press sent me, especially the one written by an anonymous reader I quickly recognized as Marc Brettler. Marc's encouragement, teaching, and example have aided me in ways that go far beyond that very helpful (if imperfectly anonymous) evaluation. His influence and that of my other teachers – Stephen Geller, Tzvi Abusch, and above all Michael Fishbane – can be detected in every chapter of this book: in the ways I read, in the ways I draw broad significance from the smallest details, in the ways I go back to ancient texts and move forward from them.

Of all the conversations I have had on the topics I discuss in this book, none have touched me as much as those I had with my son, Avraham Ayyal Sommer.

When the rabbis commented in *Bava Batra* 12b that prophecy after the destruction of the Temple was given to children and fools, they intended to disparage prophets rather than to praise children, but in listening to the comments and questions of my son, who still has several years to go before he reaches the age of *mitzvot*, I sometimes wondered whether the rabbis spoke more truly than they knew. The seriousness with which he regards the subject of this book has been, in the basic sense of the word, an inspiration. My daughter, Sarah Gilah Sommer, has been a constant delight throughout the years I have worked on this book. Her good humor and stunningly apt practical advice never cease to lift my spirits. I see now that when Jennifer and I gave her the middle name גילה ("joy"), we, like the rabbis in *Bava Batra*, spoke more wisely than we could then have foreseen. If readers find this book worthwhile, then they share my debt to my wife, Jennifer Dugdale, for her patience and support. To her this book is dedicated. חן חן לה.

Benjamin D. Sommer

Evanston, Illinois

August 2008

The week of our thirteenth anniversary

בנימין דוויד זומר

אבנסטון, אילינוי

מנחם אב תשס"ח

במלאת י"ג שנים לנשואינו

Introduction: God's Body and the Bible's Interpreters

THE GOD OF THE HEBREW BIBLE HAS A BODY. THIS MUST BE STATED AT the outset, because so many people, including many scholars, assume otherwise. The evidence for this simple thesis is overwhelming, so much so that asserting the carnal nature of the biblical God should not occasion surprise. What I propose to show in this book is that the startling or bizarre idea in the Hebrew Bible is something else entirely: not that God has a body – that is the standard notion of ancient Israelite theology – but rather that God has many bodies located in sundry places in the world that God created.

The bulk of this book is devoted to two tasks: first, demonstrating that in parts of the Hebrew Bible the one God has more than one body (and also, we shall see, more than one personality); and second, exploring the implications of this fact for a religion based on the Hebrew Bible. The first of these tasks is historical and descriptive in nature. The second, especially as taken up in the last chapter, is theological and much more speculative.

Before I embark on these two tasks, however, some readers may find a brief discussion of the corporeality of the biblical God beneficial. After all, Sunday school teachers and religious sages have long taught Jews and Christians that the Hebrew Bible is distinctive among the religious documents of antiquity precisely because it rejects the notion of a physical deity. The formidable authority of childhood teachers and the less robust influence of theologians have embedded the notion of the noncorporeal Hebrew deity so deeply into Western thought that some readers may be skeptical of my starting point (to wit, that the biblical God has *at least* one body). Consequently, it will be worthwhile to glance at a small sample of the relevant evidence found throughout scripture and to explore how some modern scholars attempt to evade this evidence.

THE EMBODIED GOD

One need not go very far into the Bible to find a reference to God's form or shape. Both terms, in fact, appear in the twenty-sixth verse of the Bible, in which God addresses various unnamed heavenly creatures as follows: "Let us make humanity in our form, according to our shape, so that they rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds in the sky, and the beasts, over all the earth and all the creeping things that

creep on the earth” (Genesis 1.26). This verse begins from the assumption that God and the unnamed heavenly creatures have bodies, and it tells us that human bodies will have the same basic shape as theirs. Because this verse plays an important role in [Chapter 3](#) of this book, I do not discuss it at length here. Suffice it to say that the verse makes clear that human and divine bodies have the same contours, but it does not say anything about what the respective bodies are made of.

We will see later, in [Chapter 3](#), that some biblical authors regarded the substance of the divine body as one of its distinctive features: This body was stunningly bright, so that it had to be surrounded by dark clouds to protect anyone nearby. In modern terms, we might tentatively suggest that this body was made of energy rather than matter. We can term this conception of God *anthropomorphic* in the most basic sense of the word: having the shape of a human. But because the divine body according to this conception is not necessarily made of the same sort of matter as a human body, it might be appropriate to term this belief a *nonmaterial* conception of God or even a spiritual one. Indeed, Yehezkel Kaufmann, the greatest and most influential Jewish biblical scholar of modern times, describes the Hebrew Bible’s conception of God as at once spiritual and anthropomorphic: The biblical God, Kaufmann maintains, had a form but no material substance.¹ Kaufmann’s portrayal, we shall, see, does not apply to the whole Hebrew Bible, but it aptly captures the peculiar type of anthropomorphism found in many parts of the biblical canon.²

As one moves forward in Genesis, one quickly arrives at additional verses that reflect the physicality of God – and although some of these verses point toward a nonmaterial anthropomorphism,³ others reflect a more concrete conception of God’s body. We can term this conception *material anthropomorphism*, or the belief that God’s body, at least at times, has the same shape and the same sort of substance as a human body. In Genesis 2.7 God blows life-giving breath into the first human – an action that might suggest that God has a mouth or some organ with which to exhale. Less ambiguously, in Genesis 3.8, Adam hears the sound of God going for a stroll in the Garden of Eden at the breezy time of the day. A being who takes a walk is a being who has a body – more specifically, a body with something closely resembling legs. As we move forward in Genesis, we are told that God comes down from heaven to earth to take a close look at the tower the humans are building (Genesis 11.5) and that God walks to Abraham’s tent, where He engages in conversation (Genesis 18). Again, these are actions of a being with or in a body. They point toward a crucial similarity between the divine body and any other body (human or nonhuman, animate or inert): *The divine body portrayed in these texts was located at a particular place at a particular time*. It was possible to say that God’s body was here (near Abraham’s tent, for example) and not there (inside the tent itself), even if God’s knowledge and influence went far beyond that particular place. Indeed, this is what I mean by “a body” in this book: *something located in a particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance*.

To be sure, many readers believe that the God of the Hebrew Bible cannot be seen, a circumstance that many assume to result from God's lack of a body. After all, Yhwh famously informs Moses in Exodus 33.20, "A human cannot see Me and live." In fact this text does not claim that God has no body for us to see; the point is rather that seeing God's body will lead immediately to death. (Similarly, the statement, "One cannot touch a high-voltage wire and live," does not mean that there is no such thing as a high-voltage wire; on the contrary, high-voltage wires are dismayingly, dangerously real. So is the embodied deity of the Hebrew Bible.) The belief that one could see God but that doing so would be fatal is widespread in scripture, and it is closely related to the conception of God's body as extraordinarily luminous: The light God's body gives off is not just blinding but deadly.

What is surprising is how many people discovered that there were exceptions to this rule.⁴ "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw my Lord, sitting on a throne high and lifted up; His clothing filled the palace," Isaiah tells us in 6.1. The prophet is not surprised to discover that God has a body (or clothing); rather, Isaiah is dismayed at having seen it, because he is sure he is about to die: "I said, 'Woe is me, for I am doomed, for I am a man with impure lips, dwelling among a nation with impure lips, and my eyes have seen the king, Yhwh of hosts'" (6.5). Divinity, we know from other parts of the Bible, does not tolerate the various forms of ritual impurity that were perfectly normal for men and women; it is for this reason that humans coming into even indirect contact with God had to take careful steps to become ritually pure. Yet Isaiah suddenly found himself in direct visual contact with the deity, and, reasonably enough, he expected to die. In his case, however, a heavenly being purified him with a burning coal, which somehow allowed him to see God without the normal danger, and Isaiah became one of several exceptions to the general rule described in the Bible.⁵

Some biblical texts, on the other hand, consider looking at God as perfectly safe; for them, God's body is not dangerously luminous, at least not all the time. Unlike Isaiah, the prophet Amos expresses no fear at having seen God. He simply informs us, "I saw God standing at the altar" (Amos 9.1). Adam and Eve hide when they hear God walking in the garden not because they fear seeing the divine body but, we are told, because they suddenly felt shy about being naked (Genesis 3.8–9). Abraham speaks with God respectfully, but without giving any sense that standing right next to God is dangerous or unusual (Genesis 18–19). This case is especially revealing: When Abraham first saw God approaching his tent, he seemed to think that his visitor was an ordinary human being, rather than the creator of the universe.⁶ In these texts God's body, at least at first sight, did not look different from a human body. Other biblical texts also regard seeing God as involving no particular danger, whatever the body's substance or luminosity. Exodus 33, the same chapter that told us that a human cannot see God and live, nevertheless informs us that Moses regularly went out to a special tent outside the Israelite camp to converse with God. God would come down to the tent surrounded by (or in the form of?) a pillar

of cloud (Exodus 33.9), “and Moses would speak with God face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Exodus 33.11).⁷

The same chapter, however, goes on to tell us that Moses was not able to see God’s face, but that he was, briefly, allowed to see God’s back, which apparently is less harmful (Exodus 33.22–3). In these verses, perceiving the divine body, at least in its entirety, does involve danger; God protects Moses by putting His hand, which seems to be quite large, over Moses’ body as He passes by. Notice that Exodus 33 contradicts itself on the question of whether a human (or at least one exceptional human) can look at God and, if so, how much or which parts can be seen safely. In fact, the chapter is an anthology of conflicting traditions regarding the presence of God and how humans relate to it⁸: An ancient Israelite editor crafted this chapter by collecting originally independent texts in order to pose a debate concerning a single theme.⁹ What is crucial to note for our purpose is that none of the texts edited into this chapter make the claim that God does not have a body; the debate in which they engage concerns itself exclusively with the effect that body has on humans nearby.

SCHOLARLY AVOIDANCE

To these examples one could add copious evidence from narrative, prophecy, and psalms, many of which are examined in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. In light of these texts, it is surprising that many scholars ignore or even deny the corporeality of the biblical God. Others acknowledge the evidence but attempt to minimize it or to claim that it is to be understood only symbolically.

A case in point published not long ago is Erhard Gerstenberger’s *Theologies of the Old Testament*. In this lengthy work, Gerstenberger studies the ways in which Israelites from various social and historical settings understood divinity.¹⁰ He highlights unexpected facets of the attitudes toward the divine realm, in particular attitudes with strong connections to Canaanite and Mesopotamian religions. Thus one might have thought that he would be especially open to acknowledging the anthropomorphisms ever present in biblical conceptions of God. But Gerstenberger never mentions the embodied nature of Yhwh. The closest he comes to touching on the subject is a passing reference to Yhwh as “the invisible God” who nonetheless can smell the sacrifices.¹¹ The repeated references to God’s visibility in Hebrew scripture go unnoticed.

An especially problematic instance of this tendency is found in an influential book by a scholar of comparative literature, Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*. Scarry devotes a third of this book to analyzing notions of the body, human and divine, in biblical texts from both the Old and New Testaments. Scarry maintains that

throughout the Old Testament God’s power and authority are in part extreme and continual amplifications of the fact that people have bodies and He has no body. It

is primarily this that is changed in the Christian revision, for though the difference between man and God continues to be as immense as it was in the Hebraic scriptures, the basis of the difference is no longer the fact that one has a body and the Other has not.¹²

Scarry seems genuinely unaware of the fact that the Hebrew Bible contains not a single verse denying that God has a body, and she fails to attend to the Hebrew Bible's frequent references to the deity's corporeality. Scarry asserts that the basic contrast between human and divine in Hebrew scripture involves distinguishing those with bodies but no voice from the One with a voice but no body: "The place of man and the place of God in the human generation that so dominates Genesis are easy to separate from one another: the place of man is in the body; the place of God is in the voice."¹³ Unfortunately, Scarry's understanding of the Hebrew Bible's anthropology (that is, the biblical concept of humanity) is no stronger than her grasp of its theology: Even more than the Hebrew Bible affirms God's embodiment, it repeatedly insists that humans have a voice to talk back to God. One thinks not only of effective pleas and proposals from human voices in biblical narrative, such as those involving Abraham in Genesis 18, the enslaved Israelites in Exodus 2.6, Moses in Exodus and Numbers, and Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 (to name but a few of the more well-known cases), but also of the pervasive genre of complaint prayers in the books of Psalms and Jeremiah, as well as laments found in the Book of Lamentations and throughout the prophetic books.¹⁴

Scarry has read Genesis 3.8 (in which God walks in the Garden of Eden), and she deals with it by suggesting that for a brief moment God has taken on a body.¹⁵ But Genesis 3 nowhere suggests that the divine body referred to is temporary. Similarly, she knows about Exodus chapters 25–40, which are among the most anthropomorphic in the Bible, for they describe in detail the building of a home in which God can physically reside on earth. Acknowledging that these chapters hint at an embodied God, she argues that the notion of divine embodiment has stealthily penetrated this and several other passages; indeed, she claims that this penetration deconstructs the Old Testament's otherwise firm stance in opposition to the corporeal.¹⁶ In so doing, Scarry presents what seems a rather subtle reading, but the reading's subtlety becomes possible only because it ignores the obvious – that there is no opposition to divine corporeality in the Hebrew Bible to begin with.¹⁷

One might dismiss the relevance of Scarry's work on the Bible; it is, after all, the product of her having uncritically accepted hackneyed misrepresentations of Jewish scripture that grew out of medieval Christian supersessionism.¹⁸ But her approach, if extreme, is also based on a tendency evident among responsible scholars: the habit of assuming that because we all know the Hebrew Bible's God has no body, evidence to the contrary must be denied or, if that is not possible, explained away.

It is the latter approach that we find in the work of Walther Eichrodt. His two-volume *Theology of the Old Testament* has been sharply, and sometimes rightly,

criticized on many points.¹⁹ Nevertheless, these volumes, first published some seven decades ago, remain among the most important written by any modern biblical scholar; they provide a profoundly perceptive synthesis of the religious teachings found in Hebrew scripture. Eichrodt is too fine a scholar to ignore the various types of evidence showing that biblical authors believed God could dwell in specific locations on earth. But he downplays these beliefs, attempting to characterize them as foreign implants into the true religion of Israel. He describes the biblical notion of God's dwelling in a temple as resulting only from Canaanite influences, against which pure Yhwhism fights violently.²⁰ Elsewhere Eichrodt admits the presence of anthropomorphism but attempts to portray the deepest levels of biblical thought as moving away from it. The following remark is typical:

Among the great mass of the people, and especially in the earlier period, the deity was frequently conceived as restricted to physical modes of living and self-manifestation. They understood the anthropomorphic expressions in a quite literal and concrete way, and so managed to acquire a most inadequate conception of the divine supremacy.²¹

Although Eichrodt realizes that "a doctrine of God as spirit in the philosophical sense will be sought in vain in the pages of the Old Testament," he goes on to claim that such a doctrine is nevertheless compatible with and implied by the Old Testament, which emphasizes God's personal side "while leaving veiled, so to speak, the fact that he was also spiritual."²² The claim that God's nonphysicality is "left veiled," of course, is but a clever way of importing into the Hebrew scriptures a notion they lack.²³

A similar tendency is evident in Walter Brueggemann's magisterial *Theology of the Old Testament*. Published in 1997, this intellectually ambitious and religiously sensitive work is one of the most innovative contributions to the field of biblical theology in the twentieth century. Most works with a title like *Biblical Theology* present summaries of biblical belief in general, without focusing on views of God, but this massive (777-page) work attends primarily to the varied testimonies to God's works and God's nature found in Hebrew scripture. Yet this book contains no section that focuses on one sort of testimony found throughout the Hebrew Bible: namely, testimony that God is a physical being. To be sure, the issue of God's real presence (for example, in the Jerusalem temple) comes up in various parts of the book. Brueggemann discusses the notion of God's "Glory" or "Presence" (Hebrew, *kabod*) several times; as we see in [Chapter 3](#), this term often refers in the Hebrew Bible to the actual body of God. Each time this theme appears in the texts being treated, Brueggemann is quick to translate the biblical witness of God's physical presence into a more abstract idea. For example, he avers: "In many texts Yhwh's glory has a visible, physical appearance of light. But," he immediately proceeds to explain, "what is seen in the end is Yhwh's rightful claim to governance."²⁴

For Brueggemann, the sheer physicality of the Glory is not what needs to be discussed; rather, what matters is that this term "refers to the claim and aura of

power, authority, and sovereignty that must be established in struggle, exercised in authority, and conceded either by willing adherents or by defeated resisters.”²⁵ This tendency to acknowledge briefly the physicality or visibility implied by the Glory and immediately to translate it into abstract terms occurs whenever God's presence is mentioned; the consistency of the tendency throughout this work is striking.²⁶ In the end, Brueggemann regards the notion of a truly embodied God as absent from the Old Testament, which prepares the way for a doctrine of incarnation in the New but remains free of it: The “notion of the incarnation is a major step beyond pathos, a step that the Old Testament does not take.”²⁷

It is not only among Christian scholars that we find a refusal to acknowledge the unabashed anthropomorphism of the Hebrew Bible. In his oft-cited book, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel*, Menahem Haran of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem provides one of the most detailed accounts of how priestly authors conceived of the desert tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple that replaced it. The priestly authors saw both as a palace at whose center was a throne; the architecture, artwork, and cultic rules of this palace all reflect the central idea that God sat on that throne.²⁸ Few scholars do so thorough a job of demonstrating the ways in which ancient Israelite priests approached their God as tangibly and dangerously present behind the curtain separating their section of the sanctuary (the holy place, or קֹדֶשׁ) from God's (the holy of holies, or קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים; see Exodus 26.33). Yet Haran chooses to regard all the evidence he so impressively gathers as metaphorical:

It should be emphasized that the conception of the house of God as a dwelling place, even in the earliest layers of the Bible, is already not understood in its real literal meaning. It is but an accepted, semi-fossilized symbol of cultic realization, a symbol whose beginnings are rooted in remote times and whose form had frozen and been preserved through the ages. There should be no doubt that in the first stages of Israelite history this symbol was already severed from its primary, direct significance and even in the pagan cultures that preceded Israel it was already removed from its magical origins and considered as a mere conventional pattern of cultic activity.²⁹

Precisely the same approach is found in Rimon Kasher's detailed study of anthropomorphism in the Book of Ezekiel.³⁰ Kasher, a professor at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv, shows in great detail that the conception of God throughout the Book of Ezekiel is thoroughly anthropomorphic. Ezekiel portrays God as a physical being with a body whose shape is basically identical to that of a human ([chapter 1](#) of Ezekiel) who sat on a throne in the Jerusalem temple, but one day stood up, walked out of the temple, stepped onto a creature with wings, and flew away ([chapters 8–10](#)); and who will fly back to sit on the throne again when the temple is permanently rebuilt at some point in the future ([chapter 43](#)). Kasher shows that considerations relating to the physical presence of God dictate most aspects of Ezekiel's plans for the new temple. Many peculiarities of the book and its approach to cultic law can be readily understood in light of these considerations.³¹ And yet,

having demonstrated how seriously Ezekiel takes the notion of God's embodiment, Kasher goes on to claim, without providing any textual warrant, that Ezekiel uses these anthropomorphic descriptions of God only because he wants to speak to the wider public in their own religious language, which was basically primitive and idolatrous in nature. The many references to God's physical side in Ezekiel are only intended, Kasher says, to turn the people away from the idolatry they earlier practiced.³² The examples of Haran and Kasher are especially illuminating: They collect copious and convincing examples of God's embodied nature, only to deny the corporeality of the biblical God on the basis of an unsupported assertion that the biblical authors didn't really mean it after all.

The techniques used by Eichrodt, Brueggemann, Haran, Kasher, and others to minimize, explain away, render metaphorical, or eviscerate the Bible's anthropomorphism are not new. Techniques of this sort have been used ever since Jewish and Christian thinkers began to believe that God is not a physical being, at which point many became embarrassed by their own sacred scripture – that is, since the early Middle Ages. The central work of Jewish philosophy, Maimonides' twelfth-century *Guide of the Perplexed*, devotes a great deal of attention (its first seventy chapters, in fact, covering some 175 pages in the standard English translation) to the question of why the Bible speaks so often in corporeal terms of a deity who is (Maimonides believes) incorporeal. For Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers (starting with Saadia Gaon), the denial of God's corporeality was a crucial aspect of monotheism; a God with a body was a God who could be divided, and for these philosophers the belief in a divisible God constituted what one might call internal polytheism. The internal polytheism implied by the belief in a physical God was even more objectionable to these thinkers than the belief in many gods.³³

Yet references to an embodied God seem to appear again and again in the authoritative texts on which these philosophers based their thinking – not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the classical rabbinic literature of the Talmuds and the midrashic collections.³⁴ In a recent book, Yair Lorberbaum reviews the many ways in which modern academic scholars specializing in rabbinic literature have evaded the consistently anthropomorphic conception of God held by the classical Jewish sages in the Talmuds and midrashic collections. Lorberbaum shows that many of the techniques his modern colleagues use stem ultimately from Maimonides' attempt to sublimate the Hebrew Bible's physical God.³⁵ We can make a similar point in regard to biblical scholarship: Many modern biblical critics attempt to evade the Hebrew Bible's conception of God by using a variety of interpretive techniques used already by religious philosophers eight centuries ago.

Lorberbaum poses the crucial question facing us: Should we take the anthropomorphic statements of the Bible (or, in the case of his book, the anthropomorphic statements of rabbinic literature) as mere metaphor?³⁶ Did these ancient authors mean precisely what they said, or did they use anthropomorphic language for some other reason – for example, because they were attempting to appeal to an

unsophisticated audience, because they used physical terms to describe something nonphysical that was otherwise difficult to explain, or because they were merely resorting to old, fossilized expressions that no longer meant something to them? In the absence of any statements telling us that these many verses are mere figures of speech, I think that a likely answer must be that the ancients who talk about God's body really do think that God has a body.³⁷

This may seem to be an argument from silence, but silence from a large sample of literature is indeed significant. The Hebrew Bible contains a wide variety of texts, from multiple genres, produced over several centuries. If its authors intended us to realize that they used anthropomorphic language figuratively, at some point surely some of them would have said so or would have given us reason to sense that their language was figurative. Here, a contrast with another anthropomorphic text may be helpful. Many synagogues end Sabbath and festival services with a medieval poem known as "The Hymn of Glory" (שִׁיר הַכְבוֹד).³⁸ This beautiful song can surprise worshippers with its bold depictions of God as an old man with white hair and also as a young warrior whose curly black hair is wet with morning dew. God achieves victory by using His strong right arm; He wears a helmet, but a king's turban is wrapped around His head, which also sports phylacteries. This poem begins by telling us that the images it uses are just that – imaginary pictures, not to be taken literally: "I will describe Your Glory, though I have never seen You; I will attribute a form to You, I will specify who You are, though I have never known You." Indeed, the way the poem mixes conflicting images in a single line seems bent on reminding us that God doesn't really have hair, white or black, wet or dry, curly or straight, and He doesn't really have a head on which any sort of hat can go. This is clearly a self-reflective, and self-undermining, form of anthropomorphism. Not only the opening lines but also the aggressive self-contradictions in the body of the text divulge to us readers how we are to understand the poem's images.³⁹

But we can search in vain for any such hint in the Hebrew Bible. The closest we can come would be the insistence of the Book of Deuteronomy that the people did not see any form when the Ten Commandments were revealed at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4.15). Even this statement does not deny that God has a form, however; as we see in [Chapter 3](#), Deuteronomy insists only that God's body never comes to earth because it always remains in heaven. Similarly, the Ten Commandments prohibit Israelites from making a physical representation of God, but they never deny that God has a body that might in theory be represented.⁴⁰ (American law prohibits making copies of a dollar bill, but in doing so, American law does not intend to deny that real dollar bills exist. On the contrary, Congress instituted the prohibition precisely to protect the value of real dollar bills. So too biblical law prohibits idols of Yhwh so as to maintain the unique nature of God's body.⁴¹) As a result, we can agree with the assertion of the great scholar of antiquity, Morton Smith, that the burden of proof is on those who would read ancient descriptions of God as metaphor or allegory, not the other way around.⁴²

The question we face, in short, is whether to admit that the Bible is a thoroughly anthropomorphic collection of documents. For religious and other reasons, many scholars have attempted to argue that it is not or at least that it is less anthropomorphic than other ancient documents produced by the nearby cultures of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt. Other scholars, however, have pointed out that the ancient texts available to us do not support that assertion. Yochanan Muffs, in many ways the finest Jewish biblical theologian, rightly points out that biblical religion was in some senses more anthropomorphic than Mesopotamian religion.⁴³ Mark Smith, a scholar of biblical and Canaanite literature, concurs, asserting there is no reason to think that Israelite sages were somehow more hesitant or self-reflective about their anthropomorphic conception of the deity than sages elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In fact, Mesopotamian thinkers addressed questions of anthropomorphism in their own ways. In some of their descriptions of the divine, Smith points out, Mesopotamian authors deliberately “heighten the anthropomorphism to make the deity transcend the basic analogy between humans and deities. . . . Anthropomorphism is both affirmed and relativized. Such texts create a new form of anthropomorphism, what R. S. Hendel insightfully calls ‘transcendent anthropomorphism.’”⁴⁴ Other biblical scholars have also acknowledged what many of their colleagues evade: that the biblical God is a physical being.⁴⁵

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

I hope to have made clear with these few examples that the Hebrew Bible’s authors regarded God as a being who could be located at particular times in specific places – that is to say, as an embodied being. I hope also to have made the case that more attention needs to be paid to this side of biblical theology. In doing so, I have said nothing new; at least some of my fellow biblical scholars already recognize what I have asserted here. My more original goals in what follows are threefold.

- My first goal is to describe a hitherto unnoticed debate within the Hebrew Bible about God’s nature. In doing so, I hope to uncover a lost biblical perception of God, according to which God’s body and self have a mysterious fluidity and multiplicity ([Chapter 2](#)). I intend further to investigate how other biblical texts attempt to combat that perception ([Chapter 3](#)). The latter texts, we shall see, became the dominant voices in the biblical canon. (The debate I uncover is waged especially in the texts collected in the Five Books of Moses and to some degree also in historical and prophetic books; it is these texts that receive the most attention in this book. Other ancient Israelite ways of thinking about God come to the fore in biblical texts that I do not examine in this book, such as the wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. This book attends to one aspect of biblical theology, and readers from outside the field of biblical studies

should realize that it does not provide a comprehensive review of biblical ways of looking at God.)

- My second goal is to trace some implications of that lost perception of God and the ancient debate surrounding it, both in biblical texts that championed it and in ones that rejected it (Chapters 4–5). These implications concern concepts of sacred space, which grow out of the Bible's varied notions of divine embodiment (that is to say, God's presence in a specific location or locations).
- My third goal is to consider the implications of recognizing the lost debate for our understanding of postbiblical Judaism (Chapter 6). Doing so first of all involves acknowledging the persistence of the biblical debate described here in a variety of postbiblical texts. We see later that the theological intuition uncovered in Chapter 2 does not disappear completely in later forms of Judaism or, for that matter, in Christianity. This intuition was rejected by texts that became the central voices in the canon, but it returned in new forms again and again in the traditions that grow out of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, this third goal also involves pondering an explicitly theological question: What does the way of thinking uncovered in Chapter 2 have to say to modern Jews who accept as their own scripture texts that contain what to us moderns seem to be some very bizarre ideas?

To achieve the first of these goals, it is necessary to place the biblical documents into their cultural, ideological, and theological contexts. When we examine biblical texts from within their own world – the world of the ancient Near East – we can notice crucial aspects of these texts that were clear to their original audiences, but seem hazy or completely invisible to our much later eyes. What I have to say about the Hebrew Bible in this book is based on models drawn from texts written by the Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic peoples who were the ancestors and neighbors of the ancient Israelites. Therefore, Chapter 1 treats texts and artifacts from outside ancient Israel. I imagine that many readers came to this book to find out what it has to say about Hebrew scripture, and some of those readers may be tempted to skip my discussion of Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic material in Chapter 1 so they can instead go straight to the discussions of biblical texts that follow. I beg you not to do so. Nothing I say about biblical texts in Chapters 2 and 3 will be convincing unless those texts are read alongside their close cousins from Babylonia, Assyria, and Canaan. What I attempt to do in this book is to recover a lost biblical theology. To find what has been lost, we need to enter a specific thought-world. The door into that thought-world is located in Mesopotamia, to which we now turn.



Fluidity of Divine Embodiment and Selfhood: Mesopotamia and Canaan

RELIGIOUS THINKERS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST VIEWED GODS AND goddesses as radically unlike human beings in ways that may seem baffling to people in the contemporary Western world. In the eyes of Babylonians, Assyrians, Canaanites, Arameans, and Egyptians, a single deity could exist simultaneously in several bodies. Further, a deity could have a fragmented or ill-defined self, for gods were not fully distinct from each other, at least not all of the time. (By “a self,” I mean a discrete conscious entity that is conscious of its discrete nature.) We can contrast this perspective with another one, which is evident in data from archaic and classical Greece. Greek culture provides no evidence that multiple objects could contain the presence of a particular deity at any one moment. Ancient Greek religion furthermore maintained that deities’ selves were consistently distinct from each other. Each cultures’ perception of gods’ bodies, then, reflects its understanding of gods’ selves.¹ These two ways of perceiving divinity present us with two types of answers to the question, “Are deities fundamentally similar to humans or fundamentally different from them?” For the Greeks, a god, like a human being, had a discrete body and a discrete self. For ancient Near Eastern religions, gods could have multiple bodies and fluid selves. Greek religion assumed a basic resemblance between mortals and immortals in this respect, whereas ancient Near Eastern religions posited a radical contrast between them.²

This assertion may come as a surprise to many students of antiquity. Some scholars describe ancient Near Eastern gods as basically similar to human beings in their behavior, their motivations, their characteristic endeavors, and even the physical shape they normally take. The gods’ bodies and activities, we are told, were larger, more powerful, and more long lasting than those of humans, but the difference was one of quantity, not quality.³ The anthropomorphic and anthropathic gods imagined by Assyrians, Babylonians, and Canaanites were persons, in much the same way human individuals are persons. This view of ancient Near Eastern deities is valid so far as it goes, but it obscures something essential: For the peoples of the ancient Near East, the gods were made of a different sort of stuff, not only physically but also ontologically. A careful examination of how some ancient religious texts imagined self and body, then, will prompt us to classify theological perceptions in a new way. This new classification has greater explanatory value than some more familiar polarities – for example, “monotheism vs. polytheism” and

“immanence vs. transcendence.” Further, this classification will invite us to examine monotheistic texts to see whether they, too, give evidence of both perceptions of divinity.

FLUIDITY OF THE DIVINE SELFHOOD IN MESOPOTAMIA

A striking feature of ancient Mesopotamian religions as evidenced in Babylonian and Assyrian sources involves what we may refer to as the fluidity of divine selfhood. Although gods in most respects seem to have distinct selves in narrative, cultic, and legal texts, at times their selfhood is cast into doubt. Let me give a few examples of what I mean by fluidity of selfhood.

First, I refer to a type of fluidity we might call *fragmentation*. Some divinities have a fluid self in the sense that there are several divinities with a single name who somehow are and are not the same deity. The goddess Ishtar provides the clearest example of this phenomenon. Mesopotamian treaties list divinities as witnesses who are called on to punish vassals when they violate the treaty. In several such treaties, Ishtar is mentioned more than once, usually in two or three geographical manifestations. Thus, the seventh-century treaty between the Assyrian emperor, Esarhaddon, and the king of Urakazabanu, Ramataya, lists as witnesses one goddess called Ishtar of Arbela and another called Ishtar of Nineveh, as well as the planet Venus, who is generally equated with Ishtar. Later in the same text, various gods are called on to curse Ramataya in the event that he defies Esarhaddon; these deities include Venus, “Ishtar lady of battle,” “Ishtar who resides in Arbela,” “Ishtar of [. . .] and Ishtar [. . . of] Carchemish,”* each of whom must assail Ramataya in particular ways.⁴ The same phenomenon is evident in the eighth-century treaty between the Assyrian emperor, Ashurnirari V, and Mati’ilu, king of Arpad, in which the list of witnesses includes the following: “Be adjured by Ashur, king of heaven and earth; . . . be adjured by Adad and Shala; . . . be adjured by Ishtar, lady of Nineveh; be adjured by Ishtar, lady of Arbela; be adjured by Adad of Kurba-il; be adjured by Adad of Alep . . . ”⁵

Why do these treaties include several Ishtars (and in the second case several Adads)? One might be tempted initially to note that the word *ishtar* in later Akkadian comes simply to mean “goddess,” and therefore that the word is not a proper name in these treaties at all; in that case, they would not list several Ishtars but several local goddesses. However, several Adads are mentioned in the second treaty cited above, and the word “Adad” never functions as a generic word for god in Akkadian (nor, for that matter, in Northwest Semitic languages where that god

* Throughout this book, brackets in translations of ancient texts indicate places where the ancient tablets are broken. When the translator was reasonably sure of what words were in the broken section, the conjectured phrasing is placed in brackets; otherwise, ellipses indicate that something is missing. Parentheses, on the other hand, indicate words added by a translator for the sake of clarity; I also use parentheses when I give a term in the original language.

was more at home). Consequently, it is clear that “Ishtar” in these treaties, like “Adad,” is a name, not a generic noun. Similarly, one might assert that, for these texts, Ishtar of Arbela simply *is* Ishtar of Nineveh and that these treaties refer to a single goddess with several epithets. Assyrian prayers, however, address these goddesses as closely related yet distinct beings. Here, for example, are the opening lines of Assurbanipal’s hymn to the Ishtars of Nineveh and Arbela:

Exalt and glorify the Lady of Nineveh,
magnify and praise the Lady of Arbela,
who have no equal among the great gods!
Their names are most precious among the goddesses!
Their cult centres have no equal among all the shrines!
A word from their lips is blazing fire!
Their utterances are valid for ever!
I am Assurbanipal, their favorite . . .
I grew up in the lap of my goddesses . . . ⁶

The phrasing in the fourth through seventh lines quoted here clearly distinguishes between the two goddesses. Assurbanipal uses the plural pronominal suffix *-šina* (“their”), not the singular *-ša* (“her”) throughout, indicating that they are distinct beings. Yet their separation from each other is effectively moot, because they have a single attitude toward Assurbanipal and perform the same deeds. This separation *cum* identity is clearest at the end of the hymn, where Assurbanipal seems to have two mothers, both named Ishtar:

The Lady of Nineveh, the mother who bore me, endowed me with unparalleled
kingship;
the Lady of Arbela, my creator, ordered everlasting life (for me).
They decreed as my fate to exercise dominion over all inhabited regions,
and made their kings bow down at my feet.⁷

Reading the first two of these lines, one might have thought that the parallel poetic lines assert the identity of these two Ishtars. But the next two lines use feminine plural verbs (*išīmā* [“they decreed”] and *ušaknišā* [“they caused to bow down”]). The hymn distinguishes between the two Ishtars grammatically even as it treats them functionally as one and the same: Together they formed Assurbanipal, and as one they exalted him.

Somehow, it was possible for various local and even heavenly manifestations of a single god to be effectively identical with each other and also distinct from each other. This phenomenon indicates the first sort of fluidity of divine selfhood I treat here. The deities I have discussed have a self distinct from other deities: Ishtar is not the same goddess as, say, Zarpanitu or Ereshkigal, and Adad is not Nergal. Yet in the cases we have examined, that self seems to be fragmented: Ishtar of Arbela acts independently of Ishtar of Nineveh, and both of them act independently

of Venus – yet their independent actions are completely parallel to each other. We might borrow a phrase from Indian culture to describe these local Ishtars as something like avatars of Ishtar. This term is appropriate, because it “implies a certain diminution of the deity when he or she assumes the form of an *avatāra*. *Avatāras* usually are understood to be only partial manifestations of the deity who assumes them.”⁸

Before moving on to describe another sort of divine fluidity, I should pause here to make clear what I am not saying when I describe Ishtar as having a fragmented self:

(1) The paradoxical extremes of Ishtar’s personality have often been noticed: She is a goddess of love and of war, a goddess of fertility who sets her mind to dwell in the realm of death, and an unencumbered woman who repeatedly seeks marriage (to Dumuzi, to Gilgamesh, to her father’s gardener Ishullanu). None of these apparent contradictions point to what I mean by a fragmented identity. Rather, they reflect the fact that Ishtar has, as Tzvi Abusch puts it, “a coherent and believable, if complex, personality.”⁹ The connection between libido and thanatos that Ishtar’s sensuality and ferocity imply is hardly unique to her. (A similarly complex combination of opposites is evident in the goddess Anat in Canaan, the goddess Kali in India, and any of a number of humans we might think of in our personal experience.) Ishtar’s descent to the underworld simply attests to the well-established connection between fertility deities and chthonic deities, a connection known from many religious systems in the ancient Near East and elsewhere.¹⁰ The fate of her several marriages in fact demonstrates her attachment to being unattached: As Gilgamesh unflatteringly notes when rejecting her proposal (in Tablet 6 of the neo-Assyrian version of the Gilgamesh epic), all her husbands end up being transformed into their opposites or their own worst nightmares after marrying her.¹¹ As a literary character, Ishtar has a very clear identity, even if she does not always live what contemporary therapists would term the integrated life. It is as an object of worship and a participant in ancient Mesopotamian diplomacy that she appears fragmented – not self-contradictory, but manifesting herself as separate beings in separate places.

(2) One might also think that deities like Ishtar and Hadad are fragmented in the sense that their characters or cults result from syncretism. It may indeed be the case that originally independent deities came to be merged into a character whom we see in myths or whom ancient peoples worshipped, and perhaps some of the complexities of the character reflect this historical merger.¹² Nonetheless, in referring to the fragmentary self of Ishtar or Adad, I am not alluding to this diachronic process. I emphasize rather the fact that at particular points in time, the authors of the texts examined above viewed Ishtar as unified yet multiple, that they saw Adad as manifesting himself in several independent yet parallel beings. The ancient Near Easterners who worshipped these deities neither knew nor cared about any diachronic processes that may have helped produce this phenomenon. It

is the perception of multiplicity in unity, the religious imagination that constructs or accepts this notion of divinity, that interests me in this book, not the syncretism that may have played some role in engendering it.

A second sort of fluidity involves the *overlap* of identity between gods who are usually discrete selves. Several Akkadian texts describe one god as an aspect of another god, and others refer to two gods as a single god even though the same texts also refer to each of these gods individually.

A late second-millennium hymn to the god Ninurta describes other gods and goddesses as parts of Ninurta's body:

O lord, your face is Shamash, your locks [Nisaba],
Your eyes, O lord, are Enlil and Ninlin,
Your eyeballs are Gula and Belet-ili,
Your eyelids, O lord, are the twins Sin and Shamash,

...

Your head is Adad, who [makes] heaven and earth [resound] like a smithy,
Your brow is Shala, beloved [sp]ouse who contents [Adad's heart],
Your neck is Marduk, judge of heaven [and netherworld . . .
Your throat is Sarpanitum, creat[ress of peo]ple . . .¹³

The text moves down to other parts of Ninurta's body, identifying their components with various gods. A similar phenomenon appears in a late-second-millennium hymn to the god Marduk:


Sin is your divinity, Anu your sovereignty,
Dagan is your lordship, Enlil your kingship,
Adad is your might, wise Ea your perception,
Nabu, holder of the tablet stylus, is your skill,
Your leadership (in battle) is Ninurta, your might Nergal . . .¹⁴

In these hymns to Marduk and Ninurta, one might want to detect an incipient monotheism, as all the gods are reduced to aspects of one god, who might then be viewed as possessing a clearly identified self. Indeed, major scholars have argued just that.¹⁵ But as the Assyriologists Benedikt Hartmann and Barbara Nevling Porter have separately pointed out, there is no cultic evidence for monotheism in Mesopotamia, nor even for a thorough-going monolatry (that is, for the exclusive worship of a particular deity).¹⁶ The scribes who copied these texts, and apparently the priests who recited them, were perfectly comfortable describing Marduk as Ninurta's throat one day and acknowledging Marduk as king of the gods the next. If this is monotheism, it is of an exceedingly fleeting sort. Nergal's self might incorporate Marduk's in the worshipper's mind, but this did not mean that Marduk lost his own self in the process.

A similar tendency appears in *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian epic of Marduk the creator. In several lines of this poem, the three high gods of Mesopotamia – Anu,

Ea, and Enlil – seem to be equated with the younger god Marduk. When the gods appoint Marduk as their leader, they proclaim, “Your destiny is unequalled, your word (has the power of) Anu!”¹⁷ [literally: “your word is Anu” – *zikarka* ^d*Anum*] (*Enuma Elish* 4:4).¹⁸ Anu and Marduk are equated again in *Enuma Elish* 7:101. Further, at the end of the epic, the god Enlil gives Marduk the name “Enkurkur” (7:136), which was understood by a Babylonian commentator as one of Enlil’s own titles.¹⁹ The same passage assigns Enlil’s characteristic number (fifty) to Marduk, and thus the passage implicitly conflates the two deities (7.142–4).²⁰ Finally, Marduk’s father, Ea, proclaims concerning his son, “He . . . shall have the name Ea, just like me. He shall have mastery over the arrangement of all my rites, And shall direct every one of my decrees” (7:140–2).²¹ At some level, then, these gods are identified with Marduk here, or their identity is submerged into his.²² This merger is perhaps clearest in the case of Ea. In Mesopotamian thought, name and essence were inseparable, and hence to say that Marduk shares Ea’s name is effectively to say that Marduk *is* Ea.²³

Further, this fluidity of self in *Enuma Elish* is not limited to Marduk. When Tiamat promotes Kingu to be her general, we are told that he “received the Anu-power” (3:107).²⁴ Similarly, several major gods of Mesopotamia seem at one point to be equated with each other (perhaps due to a transitive property: If they all are Marduk, they are each other as well) in Tablet 6, which describes how the gods built Marduk’s temple. In some copies of the epic, the crucial line reads, “For Anu-Enlil-Ea they [the gods] founded his house and dwelling” (6:64)²⁵; other copies leave Anu out of this line, but explicitly equate the other two gods with Marduk: “For Marduk-Enlil-Ea they founded his house and dwelling.”²⁶ It is especially significant that the house is described as “his” (*bītašu*) rather than “theirs” (which would have been *bītašunu*, a reading not attested in the various texts of the epic²⁷). As Foster notes, “The three divine names together may here be taken as a syncretism for Marduk.”²⁸ Yet, in spite of their identity with each other and with Marduk, all these deities act quite independently of each other in the epic. Anu and Ea appear in this text as characters distinct from Marduk; they not only exist before him, but they act on their own alongside him. In one sense, Marduk and Ea share a self, but at the same time Ea has a self that is not Marduk.

Porter points to a third example of this sort of ambiguous fluidity in an Assyrian ritual text that specifies the offerings allotted to various deities in a ceremony known as the *tākultu*. This text, written in Akkadian and known to Assyriologists by the abbreviation K. 252,²⁹ mentions not only well-known gods but also what appear to be combinations of some of these same gods. It lists the names of individual gods to whom offerings are made. As is typical in Akkadian scribal practice, each of these names is preceded by a special written sign, , which introduces the name of a god. (Such a sign is known as a determinative, and modern scholars transliterate it with a superscript letter^d, which stands for the Sumerian word “DINGIR” or god). Thus in its first few lines, K. 252 lists offerings

for ^dEa, ^dAnu, ^dShamash, and ^dSin (the gods of water, heaven, sun, and moon, respectively).³⁰ It continues in like fashion rather interminably, occasionally listing particular geographic manifestations of certain gods in addition to the deity's name by itself (a phenomenon that exemplifies the first sort of fluidity I discussed; see, for example, K. 252 line VII:36'). In a few instances, however, this text combines two divine names; almost all the combined names involve Ashur. Thus, we read of offerings to ^dDagan-Ashur (I:14), to ^dthe-gods-Ashur-the-divine-judges (I:16), and to ^dNingal-Ashur (V:174).³¹ The divine determinative comes before the combined name, not before each component, indicating that, for example, Dagan-Ashur is perceived as a single deity. Porter explains the phenomenon found in these lines:

The texts are intriguing because of the curiously ambivalent concept of the divine as both one and many that they present. . . . The apparent equation or temporary merger . . . of a number of gods with another god . . . suggests . . . a tendency to see certain gods as essentially equivalent or overlapping rather than entirely separate in nature, and in addition, a tendency to see one or another particular god as representing an especially intense concentration of divine powers and qualities.³²

As was the case in *Enuma Elish*, the apparent merger of two gods in this text does not seem to imply that they no longer exist as individuals:

The juxtaposed names imply no absorption of the second god by the first: in almost every case, both gods named in juxtaposition appear elsewhere in the text as independent deities, each invoked and presented with offerings as two gods with independent existences and separate powers. What does seem to be implied by the linking of the two gods' names, however, is some degree of equivalence between the two gods in terms of a shared function or quality. . . . The juxtaposition of divine names in the K. 252 text is significant because it seems to imply the similarity or even partial equivalence of certain gods, either functionally or in some essential quality.³³

In all these texts, we see what to Western thinkers may be a baffling mixture of distinctness and interchangeability in the divine realm.³⁴ These gods clearly had selves – that is, they were discrete beings. After all, they usually appear as individuals, and even in the *tākultu* text quoted earlier, the vast majority of divine names are individual, not combined ones. Yet on occasion the boundaries separating gods in these texts are porous. Porter provides a beautiful summary of the theological intuition behind these texts as she discusses the Akkadian word, *ilu*, which is usually translated “god”:

An *ilu* conceived of as a divine person is, like a human person, an exclusive, bounded entity; that same *ilu* as a quality or function can be identified with several divine persons simultaneously without implying any equation of those *ilus* in their other aspects. . . . An Assyrian *ilu*, in short, was not a “god” in our sense, but a set of related but not completely congruent phenomena and qualities, only one of which was imagined as a divine person. . . . [An *ilu*] thus had greater fluidity of manifestation and greater

potential for identification with other *ilus* who shared similar qualities or powers than the more strongly personified – and thus bounded – God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or than the anthropomorphically conceived gods of Greek mythology. . . . The equation of two Mesopotamian *ilus* in one aspect did not necessarily imply an equation of those two *ilus* as a whole; it was characteristic of *ilus* that their parts functioned to some extent independently of the whole.³⁵

The kind of theological comprehension that produces this sort of view of divinity demands our attention. Before turning toward a wider discussion of the place of what we may call fluid divinity in the study of religions, however, it is worth our while to turn to a second and, I think, related aspect of Mesopotamian perceptions of the divine.

MULTIPLICITY OF DIVINE EMBODIMENT IN MESOPOTAMIA

The Mesopotamian attitude toward divine embodiment is, I believe, closely related to its view of divine selfhood as fluid. Of course, for Mesopotamians the gods had bodies, as did all other natural phenomena.³⁶ But in Mesopotamian religions, divine bodies differ from nondivine ones in that a deity's presence was not limited to a single body; it could emerge simultaneously in several objects. This multiplicity of embodiment becomes clear in the Akkadian ritual texts that describe the activation of an idol or (to use a less loaded term) a divine image (Akkadian, *šalmu*).

Two closely related ceremonies allowed a god to enter an image: the *pīt pî* (“mouth-opening”) and the *mīs pî* (“mouth-washing”) rituals. These ceremonies and their accompanying incantations are described in a number of Akkadian and Sumerian texts. Most of these come from neo-Babylonian and neo-Assyrian libraries and date from the mid-first millennium, though references to the ceremony go back as far as Sumerian times – that is, to the end of the third millennium.³⁷ The ceremonies asserted the heavenly origin of cult statues and effected the arrival of the god's live presence into them. The texts that describe these rituals maintained that not only human artisans but the gods themselves participated in the fashioning (or “birth”) of the statue.³⁸ In some texts, the human artisans specifically deny that they made it at all. In a Babylonian ritual for mouth washing, the artisans are made to recite, “I did not make him [the statue]; Ninagal [who is] Ea [god] of the smith made him.”³⁹ Before these transformational rituals are performed, the statue is not yet a divine being⁴⁰; thus, one incantation asserts, “This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, nor drink water.”⁴¹ But the *pīt pî* or *mīs pî* ceremonies eliminated the last vestiges of the statue's human side. For example, during the ceremony, the hands of the human artisans who fashioned it are symbolically cut off.⁴² By imagining the removal of the human limb that fashioned the idol, the participants in the ritual emphasize that in reality the idol was created by the gods. To be sure, the texts describing these rituals acknowledge

that at some level human beings participated in the formation of the statue: “In heaven he was built, on earth he was built (*ibbanû*). . . . The statue is the work (*[bun]nanê*) of god and human.”⁴³ Elsewhere, however, these texts stress that the statue was created by the gods in heaven. Among the incantations recited in the *pîṭ pî* and *mîs pî* ceremonies are ones entitled “Born in Heaven by Your Own Power”⁴⁴ and “Statue Born in a Pure Place, Statue Born in Heaven.”⁴⁵ (The second line of the former incantation mentions the statue’s earthly origins, but denies any human participation even there: “On earth it is born by its own power.”) Similarly, the Babylonian version of the ritual program appears to have been given the title “In Heaven It is Born” at least in some ancient texts.⁴⁶

The vocabulary used in these texts is telling. When discussing both the heavenly and earthly origin of the statue, the texts use the Akkadian or Sumerian verb meaning “create, build, fashion,” but they use forms of the verb “to give birth” (the Sumerian is Û-TU-UD-DA) when they assert the divine or heavenly origin of the statue. The earthly origin of the statue as an object is acknowledged, but as a living thing that underwent birth, the *šalmu* is purely of heavenly origin. One version of an incantation recited during a mouth-opening ritual refers to a *šalmu* as “creation of the gods, handiwork of humans.”⁴⁷ The efforts of the *pîṭ pî* and *mîs pî* rituals are directed to transforming the latter into the former.

Having undergone these rituals, the statue becomes “purified” and “brilliant.”⁴⁸ Thus one incantation speaks of the divine statue as follows:

On the day when the god was created (and) the pure statue (*šalmu*) was completed,
The god was made visible in all the lands.
He is clothed in splendor, suited to lordliness, lordly, he is full of pride,
he is surrounded with radiance, he is endowed with an awesome radiance,
he shines out splendidly, the statue appears brilliantly.⁴⁹

This brilliance that surrounds the statue is identical to the divine splendor that emanates from the gods in Mesopotamian myth and poetry. Thus Marduk (called here by his name *Asalluḫi*) is described as follows in one typical prayer

[I am *Asalluḫi*,] who is clad in fiery brilliance, full of terrors,
I am *Asalluḫi*, wearing a tiara, whose divine splendor is laden with awe,
...
I am *Asalluḫi*, whose brilliance illumines the lands,
I am *Asalluḫi*, whose effulgence destroys walls of stone.⁵⁰

Similar descriptions appear in prayers to other gods. A prayer to Nergal reads,

Nergal has fastened on a vestment of divine splendor and awesomeness,
...
His cheekbones gleam like the glint of a gem,
His cheeks flash like a lightning bolt!⁵¹

And Ishtar is described in a hymn as follows:

Shining torch of heaven and earth, brilliance of all inhabited lands,

...

Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce.⁵²

The terminology applied to cult statues is precisely that which is characteristic for the gods themselves.⁵³ The reason is clear from the *mīs pî* and *pīt pî* texts: The cult statue was in fact divine. The priest performing the ceremony says as much in one of the texts, which directs him to do the following immediately after he performs the mouth-washing and mouth-opening rituals:

Into the ear(s) of that god (*ili*) you speak as follows:

“You are counted among your brother gods (*ilāni aḥḥēka*),”

You whisper into his right ear.

“From today may your destiny be counted as divinity (*ana ilūti*);

with your brother gods you are counted;

approach the king who knows your voice (*pīka*);

approach your temple . . . ;

to the land/mountain where you were created be released,”

you whisper into his left ear.⁵⁴

The statue, in short, is a god; it can hear, speak, and of course smell incense. The wood from which it is built can even be referred to as the “flesh of the gods” and as “the bones of the gods.”⁵⁵ A *šalmu*, then, did not merely direct the worshipper’s mind toward a god who dwelled in some other sphere; it did not *depict* the god. Rather, once the *mīs pî* or *pīt pî* ritual was complete, the divine presence entered into the statue, and the *šalmu* was the god.⁵⁶

Evidence pointing toward the unity of divine statue and divine being also appears outside the texts connected with the *mīs pî* or *pīt pî* rituals. In some Akkadian texts, the word *šalmu* is preceded by the divine determinative (𒀭, the DINGIR sign discussed on page 17, usually transliterated with a superscript^d), indicating that the statue itself is accorded divine status.⁵⁷ Thus the *tākultu* text quoted earlier includes, among the many gods it lists, deified statues generally (^d*šalmū*).⁵⁸ Yet when the word *šalmu* refers to the statue of a human being, such as a king, it is not preceded by the divine determinative.⁵⁹ Similarly, Mesopotamians often donated representations of themselves to a shrine as a token of their ongoing prayer and piety.⁶⁰ Unlike a statue of a god, these votive statues did not go through a *mīs pî* or *pīt pî* ritual.⁶¹

Indeed, even some statues of a god represented the deity without presenting him. A ninth-century tablet of the Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina informs us that after a cult statue of the sun-god Shamash went missing from a temple in Sippar during the Sutilian invasions of southern Mesopotamia, a king named Simbar-Shipak searched unsuccessfully for the statue. Unable to find it and lacking

a communication from the god with instructions for fashioning a new one, he had to make do by erecting a statue of the sun, which was not regarded as a physical manifestation of the god's presence. This Babylonian tablet, then, describes (in the words of the Assyriologist J. A. Brinkman) "the substitute of a well-known divine symbol in place of a missing cult statue. . . . Simbar-Shipak set up a representation of the sun disk as the temporary focus of the Shamash cult."⁶² Only a century later did Shamash consent to become present again, when he made available a model of the *šalmu* on a burnt shard that was discovered on the banks of the Euphrates. At that time, the Babylonian text describing these events tells us, King Nabu-apla-iddina had a statue built according to the shard's specifications, and the mouth-washing was performed on it. The contrast between these two images – Simbar-Shipak's sun disk, which was not subject to the *mīs pī* and thus merely represented the god, and Nabu-apla-iddina's *šalmu*, which underwent the ritual and thus presented the god – helps make clear that the ancients themselves saw an ontological difference between images that were mere symbols and images that were the god.⁶³

In short, a distinction existed between two types of *šalmus*: those that carried a divine being's presence and those that merely portrayed some being, whether human or divine. The real presence of divinity in the former type of *šalmu* is indicated in other ways as well. Divine statues were often simply referred to as "gods."⁶⁴ The divine quality of these statues may also be seen in the great importance attached to them; their journeys during festival processions and their fate in wartime are a central concern of Babylonian and Assyrian scribes.⁶⁵

From all this, it is clear that a divine statue in Mesopotamian thinking⁶⁶ was no mere sign pointing toward a reality outside of itself. Rather, the *šalmu* was an incarnation, whose substance was identical with that of the god; through a specific ritual what had been a physical object became a body of the god.⁶⁷ But it was not the only body of the god. There were, after all, multiple statues of any given deity, so that Marduk was at once present in his statue in Esagila (his temple in Babylon) and of course in his statues located in other sanctuaries as well. Further, there is no hint that the god's heavenly body no longer existed. A Babylonian *ilu* could be physically present in many places at once. Thus the statue was identical with the god, but it did not encompass the entirety of the god.⁶⁸

Similarly, it seems that, just as an *ilu* could enter an object, an *ilu* could also leave it. According to various historical texts, a god, when angry at a city, might abandon it, ascending from temple to heaven.⁶⁹ The statues, however, were left behind – and now they consisted of nothing more than wood, stone, and metal.⁷⁰ Further, the god could reenter the object; the *mīs pī* was performed not only for brand-new statues but also for statues that fell into disrepair or that returned from foreign captivity.⁷¹ Divine personhood, then, was identified with a *šalmu* unambiguously, but not permanently or fully. A god's substance enjoyed a sort of fluidity that is denied to that of mortal beings.

This fluidity comes to the fore in the question of whether the *šalmu* might have been seen as a divine being separate from any other god. Given the fact that the statue was itself a god and could just be referred to as an *ilu*, one might wonder whether it was an independent being, rather than a body of the same god who resided physically in heaven. This issue may lie behind a question that the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib posed concerning a statue of the warrior god Zababa he set up:

[Concerning] Zababa, I performed divination, and asked Šamaš and Adad saying: “Is Zababa the son of Anšar?” Šamaš and Adad informed me by way of a divination, and the statue of Zababa and Babu as befits him I made.⁷²

Sennacherib’s question was in all likelihood not an attempt to discover Zababa’s lineage, which after all was already a known fact. Rather, the question was whether the Zababa produced by artisans for the temple was the same Zababa whose father was the god Anšar – in other words, whether the statue had been created by human artisans in the present or fathered by a god *in illo tempore* (that is, in primeval or mythical time). Was the cult statue an entirely new being (who might be named “Zababa Jr.”) or merely a new manifestation of an age-old god? If the former, then humans had accomplished something extraordinary: They had created a god. But the answer, here as elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature, is insistently the latter. As Victor Avigdor Hurowitz points out,

It is as if the Mesopotamian idol makers were answering “no” to Jeremiah’s rhetorical question, “Can a man make gods for himself? No gods are they” (Jer. 16:20, trans. NJPS). They too recognized the impossibility of a man creating a god. However, rather than desisting from the attempt, they claimed that they were not making a god in the first place, but the gods themselves were.⁷³

It is precisely for this reason that the texts often use the term *walādu* (“to give birth, beget”) in reference to the divine statue’s creation. The identity of a statue and a god also becomes clear in a letter by an Assyrian scholar, who says of a divine emblem set up in the temple, “It is Nabu.”⁷⁴

On the other hand, there are some hints that the divine image could come to be seen as a god simply known as *Šalmu*. Akkadian texts refer to a divinity known as ^d*Šalmu*, who seems to have been identical with the sun god.⁷⁵ The apparent contradiction between two understandings of the divine *Š/šalmu* – viz., that it was identical with a particular god in heaven and that it was itself an independent god – falls away in light of the notion of the fluidity of divine selfhood. The *šalmu* was a body of the god, but it did not exhaust that god’s being; it was itself a god, assimilated into the heavenly god yet physically a distinct thing that could lose its divine status at any moment, should the deity choose to abandon it.

It follows, then, that what we saw earlier concerning the complex self of a god also applies to the god's physical presence. The divine body, like the divine self, can be fragmented yet somehow remain unified. Any one body was part of the god, but did not exhaust the god's fullness, just as a god's self was not confined to one person. In short, gods' bodies paralleled gods' selves. Similarly, a human's body paralleled a human's self in that both human bodies and human selves lack this sort of fluidity. Tzvi Abusch has shown that in Akkadian texts the fate of a human body is also the fate of a human self: If one destroys a dead human's body by burning it, or if one dismembers it by feeding it to eagles or wolves, one also destroys the person's *eṭemmu* or ghost, and the person ceases to exist as a distinct being. Properly buried, on the other hand, a person can endure as an *eṭemmu*.⁷⁶ It would not be possible to destroy a god in the same way, because a deity's multiple bodies provide insurance against being forced into nonexistence.

FLUIDITY OF DIVINE SELFHOOD AMONG NORTHWEST SEMITES

A similar parallel involving fluidity of selfhood and multiplicity of embodiment appears in the theologies of Canaanites and Arameans. (In the ensuing discussion of Northwest Semitic cultures, I use the term "Canaanite" quite broadly, to include Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Punic cultures.⁷⁷ I defer discussion of one Northwest Semitic culture, that of ancient Israel, to the next chapters.)

As with Ishtar in Mesopotamia, there seem to be many gods named Baal in Canaan who share an identity even though they are at times referred to as separate beings.⁷⁸ The term "Baal" in Northwest Semitic texts by itself usually referred to the god also known as "Hadad" or "Haddu."⁷⁹ But the term was also used along with various place names: We hear of Baal of Mount Şaphon, Baal Shamayin or Baal Shamêm [or Baal of Heaven], Baal of Peor, Baal of Ugarit, Baal of Lebanon, and Baal of Şidon. By and large, these figures seem to be local epithets of Hadad.⁸⁰ These local manifestations were largely identified with each other and with the hero known from the Ugaritic Baal epic (which designates its main character as "Haddu" or "Baal" throughout, without adding any genitive after "Baal"). Thus, in the treaty between the Assyrian emperor Esarhaddon and the king of Tyre, the terms "Baal Shamayim," "Baal Malagê," and "Baal Şaphon" refer to a single god: "May Baal Shamayim, Baal Malagê, Baal Saphon raise an evil wind against your ships to undo their moorings and tear out their mooring pole."⁸¹ Because the Akkadian verb "raise" (*lušatba*) here is in the singular, it is clear that the three epithets pertain to a single deity.⁸² (It is useful to contrast this line with line iv.14 in the same treaty, in which the joint action of two distinct deities, Melqarth and Eshmun, is invoked using a plural injunctive verb, *liddinū*; so too in line iv.9 of the treaty, in which the curse of the gods of Assyria, Akkad, and Eber-nari is invoked with a plural injunctive verb, *lirurükunu*.) Since Mount Şaphon was the heavenly mountain of the Northwest Semites (analogous to the Greek Mount Olympus), it

is only to be expected that Baal Ṣaphon and Baal Shamayim (i.e., Baal of Heaven) would be the same deity, and the fierce wind this god sends characterizes the Baal of epic and hymns, who is the storm god.⁸³

Yet in some texts these deities are referred to as independent, albeit parallel, beings. Ugaritic lists of gods often include both Baal Ṣaphon and various other Baals.⁸⁴ One such text lists the following gods: *il ṣpn / ilib / il / dgn / b^cl ṣpn / b^clm / b^clm / b^clm / b^clm / b^clm / arṣ wšmm / ktrt / yrḥ / ṣpn / ktr /*.⁸⁵ This text may be rendered: “El of Ṣaphon⁸⁶; Divine Ancestor⁸⁷; El; Dagon; Baal of Ṣaphon; baal-gods; baal-gods; baal-gods; baal-gods; baal-gods; baal-gods⁸⁸; Earth and Heaven; Skillful Goddesses⁸⁹; Yariḥ⁹⁰; Ṣaphon; Koshar,” and the list goes on. Another text lists the god Adad, Baal of Ṣaphon, and Baal of Ugarit.⁹¹ Clearly, there are many baal-gods, and they are listed separately from Baal of Ṣaphon. (The Hebrew Bible also knows of these gods, referring to them some eighteen times [e.g. in Judges 2.11 and Jeremiah 2.23]; in addition, the Hebrew Bible refers to “the Baal” fifty-eight times [e.g. in Judges 6.25 and Jeremiah 19.5].) This tendency for a single god to be mentioned more than once in these lists affects not only Baal but also El, because they list El of Ṣaphon separately from El.⁹² The same phenomenon appears also in Ugaritic cultic texts that specify offerings to various gods (these resemble the Assyrian *tākultu* discussed earlier).⁹³ One such text specifies one head of cattle for Ṣaphon, one head for Divine Ancestor, one for El, one for Dagon, one for Baal of Ṣaphon, and one for each of five groups of baal-gods⁹⁴; some, but not all, of the baal-gods are identified further in the text with Baal of Ṣaphon, Baal of Aleppo, and Tharathiya.⁹⁵ In several cultic texts not only does Baal of Ṣaphon receive his particular offering but also Baal of Ugarit receives a separate one; in some, Baal of Ugarit and Baal of Aleppo receive their own offerings.⁹⁶ A similar multiplicity of Baals may be noticed in a much later Punic inscription, which addresses itself not only to Baal Shamēm (who is probably the same god as Baal Ṣaphon [i.e., Hadad]) and Baal Ḥamon (who, as William Foxwell Albright and Frank Moore Cross have argued, is not Hadad at all but El)⁹⁷ but also an otherwise unattested manifestation known as Baal Maganim.⁹⁸

As was the case in the Mesopotamian texts that speak of Ishtar and of Adad (the Akkadian pronunciation of Hadad), the Baal of Canaanite myth seems to have fragmented into a great number of baal-gods who could be worshipped and addressed separately. Yet these gods show no individuation of personality, character, or function, and they are always mentioned alongside each other.⁹⁹ Scholars have spent an extraordinary amount of effort essaying the relationship of various Baals to each other: Is Baal Peor identical with Hadad, or is he a chthonic deity, or perhaps Chemosh? Is Baal at Carmel identical with Baal Ṣaphon, or with Tyrian Baal? Is Baal Ṣaphon in fact Baal Shamēm? Are the local baals also Hadad?¹⁰⁰ In light of the understanding of divine selfhood that I describe here, it becomes evident that these debates represent an attempt to pin down something fluid – something that cannot, indeed ought not, be pinned down at all. It is precisely for

this reason that the debates are so inconclusive. Baal of the city Ugarit is Baal of the heavenly mountain Ṣaphon, but Baal of Ṣaphon is much more than Baal of Ugarit. By a transitive principle, any two local Baals might be regarded as identical, because they are both Hadad, but they nonetheless remain distinct. Evidence for and against various equations will always exist, but the conceptual categories of “equation” and “nonequation” are not really applicable to the ancient theological intuition behind these texts.

Just as the fragmentation of a divine self occurs in Northwest Semitic religion, so too we can sense a tendency toward overlapping divine selves. Overlap among Canaanite deities becomes evident in the use of the terms שֵׁם (*shem* – “name”) and פָּנִים (*panim* – literally, “face,” and hence also “presence”) in Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Punic texts. In the Canaanite languages, these terms can refer to a person’s self – that is, the person’s essence or bodily presence. Explaining the significance of the term *shem* in Hebrew, S. Dean McBride describes what he calls the “nominal realism” prevalent in ancient Near Eastern thinking. Nominal realism is the belief in

a concrete, ontological relationship . . . between words and the things and actions which the words describe. A name is consubstantial with the thing named . . . [or] a physical extension of the name bearer, an attribute which when uttered evokes the bearer’s life, essence, and power.¹⁰¹

Much the same can be said of the term *panim*. It can simply mean “oneself,” because the face is the most identifiable part of a person.¹⁰² Yet when used in relation to a Canaanite deity, both *panim* and *shem* come to indicate an aspect of the divine self that is also distinct from the divine self. I refer not only to the tendency of these terms to refer to a particular form or representation of the divine self (a tendency evident in biblical texts discussed in subsequent chapters more than in Canaanite ones) but also to the use of these terms to refer to a second deity altogether. The term פֶּן בַּעַל (“Baal’s face” or “the presence of Baal”) occurs in twelve Punic inscriptions (i.e., late first-millennium texts from the Phoenician diaspora in the central and western Mediterranean). In each case, it serves as an epithet of the goddess Tannit.¹⁰³ Whenever Tannit is described as פֶּן בַּעַל, she is mentioned alongside Baal.¹⁰⁴ The fact that this epithet occurs only alongside Baal suggests that Tannit is his consort, and it shows that as Baal’s presence she has little independent existence. Yet in other texts Tannit is mentioned without the epithet פֶּן בַּעַל, and in these texts Baal himself is not mentioned either.¹⁰⁵ Further, in one inscription, she is mentioned alongside Baal at the outset (לִרְבַּת לְתַנַּת פֶּן בַּעַל וְלֵאדֹן לְבַעַל חַמֹּן) – “To Lady Tannit, the presence of Baal, and to the lord, to Baal of Ḥamon”) and without him a few lines later: (וּשְׁפֹט תַנַּת פֶּן בַּעַל בְּרַח אֲדָם הָא) – “May Tannit, the presence of Baal, judge the spirit of that person!”).¹⁰⁶ Thus, Tannit acts and is addressed independently, yet she is somehow also a part of Baal, at least much of the time. Shmuel Ahituv argues that Baal, as a high god, was too distant for worshippers to approach and that they approached his hypostasized and feminine presence instead of him (or rather, we

should say, alongside him).¹⁰⁷ Here, we see both the fragmentation of Baal's self and also the overlap of two deities: Tannit is at once an independent goddess and a part of her husband.

The same phenomenon occurs with the term *shem*. In a Phoenician inscription, we read that the king Eshmunazor built a temple for Baal of Sidon and a temple for *עשתרת שם בעל* ("Astarte, Name of Baal").¹⁰⁸ The same epithet is applied to this goddess twice in Ugaritic myths. One of the occurrences comes from the Kirta epic:

<i>yṭbr ḥrn y bn</i>	May Horon break, O my son
<i>yṭbr ḥrn rišk</i>	May Horon break your head
<i>ʿtrt šm bʿl qdqd</i>	(May) Astarte, Name of Baal, (break) your scalp! ¹⁰⁹

An almost identical passage appears again in a broken tablet, in a passage from the Baal epic.¹¹⁰ In these three texts, Astarte as the Name of Baal appears in parallel with another god. She appears on her own, however, with some frequency in Ugaritic and Phoenician texts (as well as in Egyptian ones).¹¹¹ Here again, a goddess who elsewhere has her own self appears as an aspect of Baal's self.¹¹² As in the more abundant Akkadian texts treated earlier, then, the selfhood of Canaanite deities was at times fluid: Gods could fragment and overlap, even though at the level of worship and mythology they usually were distinct from each other.

Finally, we may note that a few texts list not only gods but also qualities or aspects of a particular god (usually El). Thus, one list includes El and his consort Athirat but also the Mercy of El (*ḥnn ʿil*), the Constancy of El (*nšbt ʿil*), and the Well-being of El (*šlm ʿil*).¹¹³ Mark Smith points out that another Ugaritic text

includes a standard group of deities and then lists the following figures in lines 12–16:

Light and Firmness (?),	<i>ngh wsrr</i>
Eternity and Rule (?),	<i>ʿd w šr</i>
Right (and) Justice,	<i>šdq mšr</i>
Compassion of the sons of El, (?) . . .	<i>ḥn bn ʿil dn[</i>
Glory and Light	<i>kbd w nr</i>

The words *ḥn* and *šdq mšr* reflect divine qualities; the latter combination is well-known from Philo of Byblos' *Phoenician History* as Misor and Sydyk/Sedek.¹¹⁴

In these Ugaritic texts, aspects of a deity are listed as if they are independent deities, but they immediately follow the god with whom they are associated. However, by the time of the much later Hellenistic-Phoenician writer Philo of Byblos, at least two of them could be mentioned as deities on their own.¹¹⁵ Especially in the older set of texts, we can observe the fragmentation of a deity into more specific gods who remain attached to their source.

MULTIPLICITY OF EMBODIMENT AMONG NORTHWEST SEMITIC DEITIES

The deities of the Canaanites and other Northwest Semites, in short, resemble those of Mesopotamia in that they, too, have shifting and overlapping selves. It is significant, then, that we can detect evidence in the Northwest Semitic sphere that divine presence could inhabit multiple physical objects on earth without diminishing the heavenly body of the god. Among Canaanites and Arameans (and also, we see in [Chapter 2](#), Hebrews), stone and wooden obelisks or pillars were commonly the object of veneration. They are depicted on coins, they are discussed in ancient texts, and they have been found in numerous sites by archaeologists.¹¹⁶ Stelae of this type go by various names: Greek sources that describe Semitic religions mention the βαίτυλος, which is simply a transliteration of a term known in Aramaic in the plural as בתי אלהיא and in Hebrew as בית אל (*beitel* or *bethel*)¹¹⁷; biblical sources speak of the מצבה (*maṣṣebah*), Phoenician and Punic inscriptions of the related terms מַצְבַּת, מַצְבָּת, and נִצָּב,¹¹⁸ Nabatean and Palmyrene inscriptions of the מַצְבָּא, and Aramaic inscriptions of the נִצָּב; Ugaritic texts refer to *ztr* and *skn*, the latter of which also appears in Akkadian texts from Northwest Semitic areas as *sikkānu*.

At least two of these terms suggest that the stelae were sometimes viewed not simply as a symbol of a god but as a god's residence, and hence that the Northwest Semitic stelae were viewed in a way that recalls the Mesopotamian *ṣalmu* after it had undergone transformation from object to living incarnation in the *mīs pi* ritual.¹¹⁹ The first of these terms, βαίτυλος or בית אל (often referred to in English as “betyl”), means “house of god” – that is, a place where divinity resides. The sense that this object may have functioned in a way similar to the Babylonian *ṣalmu* is strengthened by a comment of Philo of Byblos, a first-century C.E. Hellenistic writer who transmitted Phoenician culture to a Greek-speaking audience. He informs us that the god Ouranos invented the betyls, which were “animated stones” (βαιτύλια, λίθους ἐμψύχους).¹²⁰ Just as the *ṣalmu* could smell and hear, the βαίτυλος was endowed with ψυχή, with breath or life. Further, various ancient texts refer to a Northwest Semitic god named Bethel.¹²¹ This god appears in seventh-century Assyrian sources (where he is classified as a Phoenician or Aramean deity),¹²² in Aramaic texts from the sixth century on, in Aramaic names, and in Hellenistic sources including Philo of Byblos, who describes a god Betyl (Greek, Βαίτυλον) as a son of Ouranos.¹²³ It is significant that Philo first describes Betyl as a god, the son of Ouranos, and shortly thereafter asserts that Ouranos fashioned the betyls, which were living stones. The two passages do not contradict each other when viewed within the Northwest Semitic tradition they reflect. Ouranos created the ability to incarnate living divine presence in stones, and hence he was the father of the deified stones or betyls/Betyls.¹²⁴ Just as a god *Ṣalmu* is known from Mesopotamia, so too the deified stones themselves became an object of worship and hence an quasi-independent god with its own cult.¹²⁵

We can note, then, a parallel between the notion that a god is present in a *statue* in Mesopotamia and in something called a *house* or *dwelling place* (בית) among

Northwest Semites. The semantic range of בית in the term בית־אל (betyl) is not limited to a building; in most attested cases, the betyl is not literally a house but a stone.¹²⁶ The use of the term בית is tantalizing, for it recalls a further parallel between the Mesopotamian *šalmu* and the Northwest Semitic בית. We have seen that Mesopotamian texts speak of the divine statue as having created itself. (This idea is another way of denying the human production of the statue.) Thus when Sennacherib discusses the creation of a statue of Ashur, he pointedly refers to the god as *bānû ramānīšu* – “the one who created himself.”¹²⁷ The same idea of autogenesis appears in Ugaritic literature, but there it is connected to the House of Baal, which “constructed itself from a fire into which gold, silver, and lapis lazuli had been thrown.”¹²⁸

The second term that refers to a residence or body of the god appears as *skn* in Ugaritic and *sikkānum* in Akkadian texts from Northwest Semitic areas. Both Karel van der Toorn and Tryggve Mettinger suggest that this term, which refers to an upright stone slab (or, *stele*), was thought of as the residence of the god rather than a mere symbol.¹²⁹ Since the verbal root *skn* in Mari texts appears to mean “to inhabit, to dwell,”¹³⁰ the *skn/sikkānu* may be more or less identical to a betyl: a stone in which divinity dwells or, more precisely, in which a particular god is present.¹³¹ Significantly, *skn* also served as a divine name, whose vocalization is likely to have been Sikkun (perhaps also Sakkan). The god’s name appears as a part of human personal names (that is, in what scholars call theophoric names) known from Hellenistic, Phoenician, Punic, and Akkadian sources. For example, an Assyrian text mentions a Phoenician refugee from Sidon named Abdi-Sikkuni (“servant of Sikkun”), and a Phoenician text refers to an individual called גרסכּן (“protege of Sikkun”).¹³² Reference to the god himself is admittedly rare: The name is found only in a Phoenician inscription, where it is written with a prosthetic aleph and pronounced something like “Askan”: מִזְבֵּחַ זֶ אֵשׁ יָנַח בְּנִחְדָּשׁ . . . לְאַסְכָּן אֲדָר יִבְרָךְ (“This altar, which Benḥadash set up . . . for exalted Askan, may he give blessings”).¹³³ The god Sikkun seems to have been a divinized stele. Just as the *šalmu* and the betyl that incarnated a god could become gods (^d*Šalmu* and Bethel, respectively), so too the *skn* yielded a god named Sikkun or Askan.¹³⁴

Stelae are known to have been sacred to various gods; El and Baal, for example, are associated with stelae, as are deified ancestors.¹³⁵ In some cases, these gods were considered to be present in the stelae, especially in the betyl and the *skn*. But there is no reason to conclude that they were exclusively present in any one object. A deity’s heavenly body no doubt continued to exist even when the deity was embodied in a betyl; moreover, deities were typically embodied in many different stelae. In fact, even at a single site, several stelae could embody a single deity.¹³⁶ In the Northwest Semitic realm, as in Mesopotamia, we find fluidity of divine selfhood and of divine embodiment. Among Canaanites and Arameans, as among Babylonians and Assyrians, a deity’s ability to be more than one person correlates with the ability to be in more than one place.

POLYTHEISM AND THE FLUIDITY OF DIVINE PERSONHOOD

What stands behind this conception of the divine in its distinction from the human? One might be tempted initially to suggest that what I have described here is characteristic of (perhaps even the salient characteristic of) a polytheistic system. Yet counterexamples belie this suggestion. To be sure, the phenomenon I discuss here can be found in other polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East. Nearly identical conceptions can be found in the culture of ancient Egypt. Evidence for the fragmentation and overlap of divine selves is especially strong there.¹³⁷ (Egyptian gods overlapped in various ways; to take but one of the most well-known examples, the reigning Pharaoh's person was identified with Horus, but on his death the Pharaoh's person lost its identification with Horus and merged with his father Osiris.) Further, a mouth-opening ceremony played a prominent role in Egyptian religion,¹³⁸ and the existence of many statues of the same god there similarly suggests that Egyptian deities were present in more than one body. Nevertheless, this sort of fluidity is not prominent in the polytheistic religion of archaic and classical Greece. Thus we can note a striking contrast between those polytheistic systems that emphasize fluidity (such as those of Mesopotamia and Canaan) and those which do not articulate this notion (such as that of ancient Greece).

FLUIDITY IN CLASSICAL GREECE?

Before moving on to ponder the implications of the conclusion that the polarity "fluidity vs. nonfluidity" is not the same as the polarity "polytheism vs. monotheism," I need to devote some attention to evidence that might appear to suggest that archaic and classical Greek religion does in fact display the notions of divine fluidity and multiplicity. The discussion that follows refers to archaic and classical Greek religion. I do not address Minoan-Mycenaean religion on the one hand or Hellenistic and late antique religions on the other. In the latter especially the fluidity model can be detected (for example in neo-Platonism) – perhaps due to the influence of Near Eastern, especially Egyptian, religions.¹³⁹

(1) In classical mythology, a god might alter his or her bodily form. This phenomenon differs from the situation we have seen in Mesopotamian texts. Zeus, for example, transforms himself, becoming a swan to seduce Leda and a bull to snatch away Europa, but he does not seem to have more than one body, one anthropomorphic, a second cygnomorphic, and a third taumorphic. Similarly, there is no indication that Athena remains in her anthropomorphic body in Olympus even as she takes the form of an owl to fly through Odysseus' house in Ithaca. An examination of the many passages in which Athena changes her form in Homer's *Odyssey* shows no evidence that the goddess takes on a new body in addition to the one she already has; rather, her body is transformed into a new shape and then back

to its previous form; see, e.g., 1:96–105; 1:320; 2:266; 2:383; 2:401; 13:312–13; 16:156–65; perhaps 17:361; 18:33–40; 20:30; 22:205–10, 22:239–40 (an especially revealing case!), 22:305; see also *Iliad* 1:188–222.¹⁴⁰ An instructive example of this phenomenon is found in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, in which Demeter appears in various forms to human beings. We are told that she left (νοσφισθεῖσα) Olympus (2.92) to become manifest to humans; her presence on earth, then, should not be taken to suggest that she was simultaneously in heaven and earth. Initially, she took the form of an old crone, finding employment as a nurse and housekeeper for the king of Eleusis. Later, however, she resumes a more typical divine aspect:

The goddess changed her form and stature, thrusting old age away; beauty wafted all about her, a lovely fragrance spread from her scented dress, and a radiance shone afar from her immortal body; flaxen locks bestrewed her shoulders, and the sturdy house was filled with a brilliance as of lightning as she went out through the hall (2.275–80).¹⁴¹

At this point, her human hosts suddenly realize that their guest is no crone. It is clear in this passage that Demeter's transformation occurs within a single body, which changes radically and quickly. Cases such as these, in which a human comes to recognize a divine body that had been altered to cloak its real nature, are especially illuminating. The deity's earthly body does not disappear, to be replaced by another body that comes down from heaven, but a single divine body casts aside its disguise. (For especially revealing examples, see *Odyssey* 1:319–23 and 13:312–13 and the very clear case in Virgil's *Aeneid* 1:402–10.) In both Homeric epic and in Virgil, it is especially as the deity turns to leave that the disguise wears off, as if the disguise holds only for the deity's front, not his or her back.¹⁴²

The transformations of divine bodies in classical sources are therefore different in quantity but not quality from the changes that occur in a human body. My body today has a shape somewhat different from the shape it had twenty years ago, and my head is covered with less hair.¹⁴³ The bodies of Zeus, Athena, and Demeter change to a much greater extent and much more swiftly than mine, but in classical religion both gods and humans seem to have a single body that metamorphoses, whether slowly or suddenly, partially or radically.¹⁴⁴ The deities of the ancient Near East, on the other hand, differ fundamentally from humans, in that their physical presence can abide in many locations at once.¹⁴⁵

(2) Various scholars suggest that cult images in ancient Greece were receptacles or vessels of divine presence, and not merely aesthetic representations or decorations. In fact, however, no archaic or classical Greek source I know of describes these statues as embodiments of divinity, even though the statues in question were regarded as deeply sacred and even otherworldly. These statues constitute what Mircea Eliade calls a *hierophany* (an object touched by divinity), but such a statue is neither a *theophany* (the arrival of the god in a particular location) nor an *incarnation* (the bodily presence of a deity).¹⁴⁶ It is worthwhile to examine in

greater detail the evidence of these statues and the distinction between hierophany on the one hand and incarnation or theophany on the other.

Margalit Finkelberg describes two kinds of statues in ancient Greece.¹⁴⁷ Neither kind corresponds to the Mesopotamian *šalmu*. One type consists of more recent and expensive statues of the gods that were donated to a temple. The creations of artists whose names are often known to us, these statues were usually not located near the god's altar, and sacrifices to the deity did not focus on them. "None of them," Finkelberg writes, "was regarded as the direct object of religious worship. . . . The statues of gods dedicated both inside and outside the temple were regarded as offerings to the deity rather than as cult statues in the strict sense of the word."¹⁴⁸ The other type, Finkelberg maintains, is a genuine cult statue.¹⁴⁹ These statues were consistently older than statues from the first category. Some of them were representational in form, whereas others were mere planks of wood or pillars of stone. Finkelberg maintains that these statues "acted as embodiments of the deity and accordingly as the direct objects of worship. . . . [They were] considered as both the focus and the active participant of the cult."¹⁵⁰ In fact, however, the evidence Finkelberg gathers from a wide range of classical sources demonstrates her second claim – that they were objects of worship and the focus of a cult – but not her first. For example, she describes a statue of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens that was regarded as exceedingly ancient already in classical times. It was this statue, not the newer and more artistically rendered one made by the great artist Pheidias in the fifth century B.C.E., that was regarded as "the holiest of all images" (as Pausanias called it in the second century C.E.)¹⁵¹ and served as the focus of cultic activity. This statue was believed to have fallen from heaven. But Pausanias' description of this statue never claims that the goddess dwelt in it; the image did not, so far as the evidence indicates, smell using its nose or hear using its ears.

Statues that Finkelberg puts in her second category, then, were ancient and mysterious; they were often miraculous in origin.¹⁵² Their antiquity and exotic nature indicate, however, not that they were actual incarnations like the *šalmu* but that they were hierophanies. An object that constitutes a hierophany, according to Eliade, becomes, at the very moment of its origin, "saturated with being. . . . [It] appears as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning or value. . . . Its very existence is . . . incomprehensible, invulnerable, it is what man is not."¹⁵³ Such an object has come into intimate contact with an extraordinary or mythic force; it points back to what Eliade calls "primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'" and represents a "sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today."¹⁵⁴

But such an object is not necessarily identical to the real presence of a god. Rather, the hierophany has been touched by divinity, so that it has become distinguished from the profane and is able to connect the mundane to the realm of divine power. A hierophany is not necessarily an incarnation; the ancient Greek statues in question

were merely the former, whereas the Mesopotamian *šalmu* were the latter.¹⁵⁵ The descriptions Finkelberg gives for the older Greek statues clearly demonstrate that these statues were understood by the ancients to belong to a distinct category, that they were holier than the more recent and artistic statues, but they never indicate that they were actual bodies of the god.¹⁵⁶ As Walter Burkert plainly puts it, “There are no magical rites to give life to the cult image as in Babylon.”¹⁵⁷ The classicist Tanja Scheer in particular stresses the importance of this point:

It is altogether highly conspicuous that Greek sources never report what took place at the erection of a new divine image. One never finds indications that a particular and consistent ritual was undertaken during these occasions or shortly after them. One never finds that something had to take place that distinguished itself in any respect from regular festival rites. . . . The absence of rituals of consecration that could attest to the attempt to bind the divinity in its image in a lasting manner is a fact that cannot be overstressed.¹⁵⁸

Scheer further notes that Hellenistic and especially Roman evidence for such rituals does exist, which, she points out, has led many scholars to assume that such a ritual also occurred in archaic and classical Greece. In fact, the consistent absence of any such rituals in the abundant archaic and classical texts themselves rules out this possibility.¹⁵⁹

Finkelberg uses an additional piece of evidence in her attempt to demonstrate that these statues were regarded as genuine containers of real divine presence: Many cult statues were out of public view most of the time. Some of these statues were seen only by priests or priestesses or were seen by the public only on special occasions.¹⁶⁰ “What concept of representation,” she asks, “could make no provision for the image of a god as an object of general contemplation? Obviously, one that saw in the image the living presence of the god.”¹⁶¹ In fact, however, the history of religions attests to similar practices that do not involve a belief in the living presence of a deity. Consider but two examples: Jewish law prohibits worshippers from looking at priests when they recite the priestly benediction in a synagogue.¹⁶² This is the case even though rabbinic literature states explicitly that God is not physically present in the priests who utter the benediction outside the Jerusalem temple.¹⁶³ (To be sure, the rabbis considered the *shekhinah* to rest on the tips of the outspread hands of the priests who recited the benediction *in the Jerusalem temple*,¹⁶⁴ and this situation might well be considered a case involving the living presence of God. But the prohibition against gazing at the priests who recite the benediction applies even outside the temple, and in those cases the *shekhinah* is not considered present.) An analogous practice pertains to scrolls of biblical books. Rabbinic Judaism requires Jews to treat a Torah scroll with great respect. Jews conduct cultic parades with Torah scrolls during synagogue services, dress them with fine garments, and often place a crown on top of them. These practices closely resemble the way ancient peoples, in both Greece and the ancient Near East, treated

divine images.¹⁶⁵ Further, Jewish law discourages direct physical contact with the scrolls. A person reading from the scroll points to its words with a special wooden or metal stick rather than with a finger, and one rolling the scroll to a new passage uses wooden poles rather than touching the scroll itself; if one has to adjust the scroll between the two poles, one places a cloth between one's fingers and the scroll itself.¹⁶⁶ But rabbinic Judaism does not regard the physical object that is a Torah scroll as an incarnation of God; it does not contain the real presence of God. Rather it contains God's words, which represent the divine but do not embody it. We see here restrictions on casual contact with a sacred object that does not contain the divine body. Both these cases involve objects that are examples of hierophany, but not incarnation. In short, the answer to Finkelberg's question cited earlier in this paragraph is that students of religion do know a concept of representation that prohibits direct contact with an object without positing the living presence of a deity in that object.

Deborah Steiner offers a more nuanced argument, according to which rituals performed in front of Greek statues "offer fresh evidence for the conception of the statue as vessel: assuming the god resident within the habitation that the image supplies, they aim to make divinity emerge and act on behalf of those performing the rite."¹⁶⁷ She describes rituals in which these images were washed, clothed, and in some cases led in procession, and she suggests a parallel between these rituals and the mouth-washing rituals that allowed divinity to enter statues in the ancient Near East. These cultic manipulations of images in Greece, Steiner argues, "may be read as gestures aimed at the renewal and revivification of the power in the image."¹⁶⁸ However, as she herself notes, nothing in archaic and classical material suggests a precise parallel to the ancient Near Eastern material.¹⁶⁹ In all the rituals she describes, both those performed on these statues and those performed in front of them, we never find the sort of clear and emphatic statements concerning literal divine presence in the image that appear in all the *mīs pî* and *pīt pî* incantations.¹⁷⁰

It is clear that Greek cult statues represented an irruption of the numinous into a mundane world, but they were not themselves identical with the god. These were items that had been touched by the gods – witness the stories of their miraculous origins – but not items that housed the gods.¹⁷¹ They were sacred because they served as the mailing address for a deity located elsewhere. Of course, the deity could see from its heavenly abode to any place on earth, and for this reason sacrifice was perfectly possible even without one of these statues in any event.¹⁷² The impressive evidence collected by Finkelberg and Steiner succeeds in demonstrating that these objects constitute hierophanies, but not that the Greeks conceived them as bodies of the gods in the way that Mesopotamian texts so insistently do.¹⁷³

Scheer comes to a similar, though not identical, conclusion in her monograph, *Die Gottheit und ihr Bild*. (Scheer's discussion is the most comprehensive study of the nature of cult statues in archaic and classical Greek religion. Its only weakness

is its failure to attend to the rich literature from the field of history of religions, which provides models for analyzing the data she collects and for testing the thesis she presents.) According to Scheer, a cult statue was the personal property of a deity and hence not a mundane artistic object, but it was not a permanent seat of the deity. Rather, Scheer concludes, each statue was a place that a god or goddess might temporarily inhabit. Each statue constituted an invitation to a god to take up residence long enough to attend to a prayer spoken or sacrifice offered in front of it. For Scheer, a cult statue might briefly and repeatedly serve as an incarnation.¹⁷⁴ If Scheer is correct, we might say that a cult statue was a hierophany because it once had incarnated the deity and because it might one day do so again. Yet the evidence Scheer collects fails to show that statues were regarded as having, however fleetingly, housed the god. Her evidence shows, rather, that they were sacred to the god who remained elsewhere and that they served as a place through which a human could direct devotion¹⁷⁵; in other words, they are what Eliade calls an *axis mundi*.¹⁷⁶ In any event, no evidence suggests that the god was physically located in many places at one time. Either the god inhabited various statues serially, or the god never actually inhabited them at all. Unlike the Mesopotamian *ilu*, the Greek god did not have multiple sets of eyes that saw and many noses that smelled in locations throughout the earth.

(3) In Greece as in Mesopotamia, gods were called by a variety of local epithets and were associated with many places.¹⁷⁷ These epithets indicate, unsurprisingly, that a god was worshipped in more than one locale. They may in some cases reflect a process through which originally separate gods came to be understood as identical – that is, syncretism. They do not, however, evince the sort of fluidity we saw with regard to Ishtar and Adad. I am not aware of any text in which Zeus Olympios and Zeus Hellenios, for example, appear together as separate but parallel beings in the manner we saw with Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Arbela. On the contrary, at least in epic we find evidence that points in the opposite direction. In *Iliad* 420–30, Thetis informs Akhilleus that she must wait before beseeching Zeus at his home on Mount Olympus, because he has gone to be adored by the noble Ethiopians. Similarly, Poseidon left Olympus to receive sacrifices in Ethiopia in *Odyssey* 1.22–30, and while he is there Zeus convenes a meeting on Olympus that Poseidon cannot attend. The assumption underlying both passages is that a god's cultic presence in one location entails his absence from his usual home: These deities cannot be in two places at one time.

In sum, archaic and classical Greek literature and ritual practice do not articulate a notion of multiplicity of divine embodiment or fluidity of divine selfhood. As Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it,

For the Greeks, the divine world . . . gathers together a multiplicity of particular divine figures, with each having its place. . . . In short, each one has an individual identity. Individual identity has two aspects: a name and a body. . . . Like human beings, the

gods have proper names. Like them too, gods have bodies – that is to say, a set of specific characteristics that make them recognizable by differentiating them from the other supernatural Powers with whom they are associated.¹⁷⁸

As we have seen, one cannot make this statement about the deities of Mesopotamia and Canaan, for they did not have the same sort of bodies possessed by humans, and they were not always differentiated from other supernatural powers or deities. The fluid notions of divinity with which we are concerned are at home in some polytheistic cultures but not others.

THE CONCEPTUAL ROOTS OF FLUIDITY

What we find, then, in the ancient Near Eastern texts and ceremonies examined here – but not in the texts and ceremonies of archaic and classical Greece – needs to be explained not by a polarity between polytheism and monotheism but by a second polarity involving differing conceptions of divinity. One may understand the Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic conceptions of divinity especially in light of Rudolph Otto's idea of the holy as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.¹⁷⁹ The awe-inspiring grandeur that Otto describes overwhelms human worshippers. That grandeur or *tremendum* can prevent a human from grasping, perceiving, or imagining the holy. As a result, a single manifestation or representation of the holy will fail to represent it fully, or as Henri Frankfort has put it, a single manifestation of a god will not exhaust the god's divinity. Perhaps the tendency of Ishtar to split into several local Ishtars, then, reflects a need to divide the fullness of her divinity into manageable portions. Related to this is the close connection of Mesopotamian deities to nature: Some of these gods did not merely control nature, but were the vital forces in nature, as Thorkild Jacobsen has famously argued. Mesopotamian gods are essentially (or began as) natural forces endowed with personality: Dumuzi is the vitality that rises in the date palm only to die later; Enlil is the force in the wind and storm.¹⁸⁰ A divine self, then, is a mask behind which lie a multitude of contradictory forces related to each other in inconceivably complex ways. Consequently, a divine self may fragment into several forces, or it may merge, if only temporarily, with other forces. If a particular aspect of nature irrupted as Ishtar in Arbela, then the same aspect could irrupt as Ishtar in Nineveh; hence, we know of two goddesses with that name in each place who were and were not the same deity. The potent authority that manifested itself in the form of the high god Anu also manifested itself in Marduk, and hence Marduk's word was Anu. The uncanny intelligence personified as Ea was also evident in Marduk, and hence Marduk had the same name, or same identity, as Ea. Yet Marduk was not entirely identical with Ea or Anu, for Marduk, unlike these other two gods, was also the force in the storm and the genius behind Babylonian sovereignty. For Mesopotamians as for the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, divinity was close by

but hard to pin down, because the very rootedness of divinity to the substance of the world allowed divinity to be reconfigured: A divine force could appear here as an aspect of one god and also there as an aspect of another. It is characteristic of the divine to manifest itself abundantly,¹⁸¹ and hence an *ilu* is not confined to one instantiation.¹⁸²

FLUIDITY AMONG MONOTHEISTS?

The texts we have examined thus far present us with a fascinating conceptual polarity. On one side stand religious visions in which divinity is unified and anthropomorphic (in the sense that God or the gods have the same sort of self that humans are perceived to have). On the other side stand visions in which divinity consists of forces that are directly accessible in many places and that may work independently of each other (though not necessarily against each other). On this side of the polarity, deities may be anthropomorphic in the narrow sense of having the same shape as humans, but more fundamentally they are radically different from human beings. These latter visions regard divine forces not merely as hard to perceive but as fundamentally shifting, dynamic, and irreducible to a single will, even though in some cases these forces belong to a single deity. In the former visions, God or the gods are ontologically quite similar to humans; the personhood of a divinity is of the same sort as the personhood of a mortal man or woman. In the latter, divine personhood is of a completely different order.

Most religions are not unequivocal examples of one or the other polarity, but evince elements of both visions at various times. It is in the particular combination of elements of each vision that a religion's perception of the divine becomes clear. For our purpose, it is especially interesting to note that some polytheistic systems exemplify the former vision, whereas others exemplify the latter. The existence of both theological visions within what begins to emerge as the overly broad and thus somewhat misleading rubric of polytheism prompts us to ask: Are there forms of monotheism that posit the existence of a single divine self, but allow for a certain degree of fluidity within that self? Can the One God have more than one body? It is to Israelite texts that we now turn to seek answers to this question.



The Fluidity Model in Ancient Israel

AT THE END OF THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, WE SAW THAT FLUIDITY OF DIVINE selfhood and multiplicity of divine embodiment are not at home in all polytheistic systems. Although these twin notions – which we may refer to more pithily as the *fluidity model* – occur among Mesopotamians and Northwest Semites, they are absent in archaic and classical Greece. This finding prompts the question that will concern us in this chapter: Can the fluidity model be found in a monotheistic culture? Before turning to evidence from ancient Israel to answer this question, I should acknowledge that many modern scholars argue that ancient Israelite culture, at least before the fall of Judah that led to the Babylonian exile in the late sixth century B.C.E., was basically a polytheistic culture. Nevertheless, other scholars are convinced that monotheism was well established in ancient Israel considerably earlier than the exile, even though some Israelites (perhaps even, most Israelites) were not monotheists. I count myself among the latter group of scholars. Moreover, I believe the documents preserved in the Hebrew Bible, when taken as a whole, are monotheistic. A lengthy defense of these assertions can be found in the Appendix, “Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel.” Consequently, we can rely on ancient Israelite material, and especially biblical material, as we attempt to see whether the fluidity model can occur in a monotheistic culture.¹

FLUIDITY OF DIVINE SELFHOOD

In the previous chapter, we examined a peculiar understanding of divine selfhood, according to which a deity can produce many small-scale manifestations that enjoy some degree of independence without becoming separate deities. This view can be found not only in Mesopotamian and Canaanite religions but also in ancient Israelite texts, some from the Bible itself and some recovered recently by archaeologists.

Hints regarding Yhwh’s fragmentation into a number of geographical manifestations are known from ancient Hebrew inscriptions and from a few scattered verses in the Hebrew Bible. Several earthenware jars, or *pithoi*, were discovered in the 1970s in the eastern Sinai at a site called Kuntillet Ajrud, which was home to an Israelite caravan station in the eighth century B.C.E. These pithoi contain

brief texts in ink, which have been dated to the early to mid-eighth century B.C.E.² One of these texts mentions “Yhwh of Samaria,” and another mentions “Yhwh of Teman” (or “of the south”). The phrase “Yhwh of Teman” also appears in an inscription written on a bench in the shrine room located in the gate of the main building. These terms seem to refer to local manifestations of Yhwh, one found in the capital of the northern kingdom and the other in the region south of Judah proper. (Yhwh’s association with Teman is also known from Habakkuk 3.3, according to which Yhwh comes from Teman to manifest Himself.) The phrasing found in the pithoi and the bench inscription recalls the references to Ishtars of Arbela and Nineveh, and to Baals of Şaphon, Ugarit, and Lebanon that were discussed in [Chapter 1](#).

It is also possible that this conception of Yhwh(s) appears in the Hebrew Bible itself. P. Kyle McCarter points out that in light of these inscriptions it appears likely that some biblical verses also refer to geographic manifestations of Yhwh: These include “Yhwh at Hebron” in 2 Samuel 15.7 and “Yhwh at Zion” in Psalm 99.2.³ To be sure, no single Hebrew text currently known refers to several of these manifestations together. Consequently, one cannot be sure that these terms refer to Yhwhs who were in some way independent of each other, but these texts at least allow one to raise such a possibility.⁴

Moreover, the first of these verses, 2 Samuel 15.7, strongly implies that Yhwh of Hebron is somehow distinct from Yhwh of Jerusalem, as Herbert Donner points out in a careful analysis of this verse.⁵ That verse concerns King David’s son Absalom, from whom David is estranged and whose political ambitions David suspects. In an attempt to convince David to allow him out of Jerusalem briefly, Absalom says to David, “Please, I should like to go to fulfill the vow I made to Yhwh in Hebron. For when I dwelt in Geshur in Aram, your servant made a vow, saying, ‘If Yhwh indeed allows me to return to Jerusalem, then I shall worship Yhwh’” (2 Samuel 15.7). Note that the phrase “the vow I made to Yhwh in Hebron” does not mean that Absalom was in Hebron when he made the vow; as Absalom states, at that time he was hundreds of miles north of there, in the Aramean principality Geshur (located in Bashan or what is now known as the Golan Heights, directly east of the Sea of Galilee). The phrase in question means that, while in Geshur, Absalom made a vow to worship Yhwh in Hebron. This raises the question: Why did Absalom need to worship Yhwh in Hebron, when after all Yhwh’s ark was in Jerusalem and sacrifices were made to Yhwh there? The answer, Donner shows, is clear: “In Hebron” is not an adverbial phrase modifying “worship” (indeed, that verb does not appear until the following sentence), nor is it an adverbial phrase modifying “I made,” because Absalom was in Geshur when he made the vow. Rather, “in Hebron” is part of the deity’s name: The prince claims that he made a vow not simply to Yhwh nor to Yhwh of Jerusalem but to Yhwh of Hebron, and thus he had to leave Jerusalem to fulfill it – for in Jerusalem one can pray to Yhwh generally or to Yhwh of Jerusalem, but not to Yhwh of Hebron!

Even stronger examples of the fluidity of divine selfhood in ancient Israel come from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The most prominent evidence comes from texts ascribed to the J and E strands of the Pentateuch. In many passages, the word מַלְאָךְ (*mal'akh* – literally, “messenger,” but usually translated “angel”) means a small-scale manifestation of God’s own presence, and the distinction between the messenger and God is murky. This *mal'akh* is something very similar to an avatar in Indian religions, and one wonders whether “avatar” might not be a better translation of the term when used this way, rather than “angel.”⁶ The *mal'akh* in these cases is not a being separate from Yhwh whom Yhwh sent on a mission; rather, it is a part of the deity that can act on its own. Alternatively, it is possible that Yhwh temporarily overlaps with some heavenly beings who do God’s bidding (which suggests a model different from that of an avatar). This conception also occurs in several passages in which Yhwh becomes ambiguously manifest to humans even without the use of the technical term *mal'akh*.

Genesis 18, a J text, provides one of the most revealing cases. At the outset of that chapter, we read, “Yhwh manifested Himself (וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים) to Abraham amidst the trees of Mamre while Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent, at the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and saw three men coming toward him” (Genesis 18.1–2). The juxtaposition of these two sentences (which are from a single Pentateuchal source⁷) implies that Yhwh appears in the form of three men, or at least in the form of one of the three men.⁸ Abraham, however, does not realize that his visitors are not human.⁹ He directs his attention especially to one of these men, whom he addresses in the singular, using the obsequious courtesy normal in the ancient Near East: “My Lord, if you find me acceptable, please do not pass by your servant” (18.3). All three men subsequently speak in 18.9; in 18.10 one visitor, still not identified explicitly, predicts or promises to return months later, at which time Abraham will have a son. Thus this visitor speaks prophetically, which is to say, in God’s voice, though whether this is because the visitor is God or merely represents God is not made clear. (The alternation between singular and plural continues throughout this passage.¹⁰) Finally, in 18.13 the narrator stops being coy and simply refers to one of the visitors as Yhwh. Two of the visitors leave, and the one who remains with Abraham is now clearly identified as Yhwh (18.22); Abraham’s knowledge is now parallel to the reader’s, for in the discussion that follows it is clear that Abraham now knows who the remaining Visitor is. The other two beings are subsequently referred to as angels (מַלְאֲכֵי, 19.1). It is clear that Yhwh appears in bodily form to Abraham in this passage; what is less clear is whether all three bodies were Yhwh’s throughout, or whether all three were Yhwh’s at the outset of the chapter but only one of them by its end, or whether the other two were merely servants (perhaps human, perhaps divine) who, for no clear reason, were accompanying Yhwh.¹¹ In any event, the being who certainly was Yhwh was less than the deity’s full manifestation. The visitor was not recognizable as God to Abraham at the outset, and he (He?) acts with a humility unbecoming

a deity as h/He stands waiting before Abraham (at least according to what even traditionalist scholars regard as the original text of verse 22¹²). Further, even though the visitor is clearly identified as Yhwh by the middle of the chapter and refers to God in the first person while speaking, h/He announces h/His intention to “come down” from heaven to observe Sodom and Gomorrah in verse 21 – even though H/he is already down on earth at this point. This visitor clearly is and is not identical with Yhwh; more precisely, He is Yhwh, but is not all of Yhwh or the only manifestation of Yhwh; rather, He is an avatar, a “descent” of the heavenly God who does not encompass all of that God’s substance.¹³ Either a localized and perhaps temporary manifestation of the deity (that is, the result of a fragmentation of the divine self) speaks with Abraham, or the deity partially overlaps with one or several messengers.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the famous J narrative in Genesis 32 in which Jacob wrestles with a being initially described simply as a “man” (אִישׁ, 32.25). One soon senses that this man is in fact some sort of otherworldly being, because he cannot remain on earth once the sun rises and because his name is a secret. (It is perfectly normal to find a text referring to an angel as an אִישׁ [man] in the Hebrew Bible; see Genesis 18.2, 19.1; Judges 13.16; Zechariah 1.8, 11; Daniel 9.21.¹⁴) Jacob names the place of this encounter Peniel (“face of God”), saying “I have seen *’elohim* face to face, yet my life was saved” (32.31). The word *’elohim* can refer both to a lower ranking divine being (or angel) and to the God also known as Yhwh, and it is not clear which meaning the text intends here. Hosea 12.4–6, interestingly, takes it to mean both as it summarizes this story in poetic parallelism:

In his might he wrestled *’elohim*,
He wrestled an angel (*mal’akh*) and prevailed.

...

It was Yhwh, the God of hosts; Yhwh was His name.

One might initially suggest that in the first of these lines the word *’elohim* means the plural noun “divine beings” and not the singular noun “God,” but the text goes on immediately to identify the *’elohim*: “It was Yhwh . . .” (12.6).¹⁵ In other words, in Hosea 12 the being who wrestled with Jacob was not a *mal’akh* who also could be called an *’elohim*; rather, it was the God Yhwh, who can also be termed a *mal’akh*. The reason for the apparent confusion between God and angel in these verses from Hosea is simply that both passages, Hosea 12 and Genesis 32, reflect a belief that the selves of an angel and the God Yhwh could overlap or that a small-scale manifestation or fragment of Yhwh can be termed a *mal’akh*.

A further example of this understanding of *mal’akh* as a humble and incomplete manifestation of Yhwh is found in another JE passage, Exodus 3–4. There we are initially told that a *mal’akh* appeared to Moses (3.2), but in the remainder of the chapter, it is Yhwh Himself who converses with the shepherd-turned-prophet. The famous fire in this passage, which burned *in* the bush without burning the

bush, is nothing other than a small-scale manifestation of God.¹⁶ This humble manifestation resembles the larger one that would take place at the same mountain not long thereafter, when the Israelites received law at Sinai.¹⁷ (The letter *bet* in the words, וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִבְתֹּאֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנָּה [Exodus 3.2], is the *bet essentiae*¹⁸: These words should thus be translated, “Yhwh’s small-scale manifestation appeared to him as [or: in the form of] a flame of fire from the midst of the bush.”¹⁹)

An especially revealing case occurs in the J text found in Exodus 33.1–3, which immediately follows the story of the Golden Calf. God, still incensed at the people, announces that He will not accompany the people on the journey, lest He destroy them on the way. Rather, His *mal'akh* will accompany them. But this *mal'akh* is not quite independent of God; God uses the first person to describe its activities, not the third (וגרשתי – “I shall expel”).²⁰ The accompanying angel in this passage is the same one JE mentioned in Exodus 23.20–3. There, the people were told they must obey the angel who travels with them because the angel incorporates a manifestation of God’s presence or a hypostatized manifestation of God known as God’s *shem* (“Name”): “I will now send an angel in front of you . . . Take care with him and obey him . . . for My Name is within him” (הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ מִלְאָךְ לְפָנֶיךָ . . . הַשְּׁמֵר מִפְּנֵי וְשָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי . . . כִּי שְׁמִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ) (Exodus 23.20–21). As we shall see in the subsequent chapter, by stating that His name is in the angel, Yhwh indicates that the angel carries something of Yhwh’s own essence or self; it is not an entirely separate entity. But it clearly is not fully identical with Yhwh, either; after all, the point of the *mal'akh* in this case is that God will not travel with the people lest the full presence and anger of God destroy them.²¹

Evidence of this sort of angel is not limited to the Pentateuch. In the story of the commissioning of Gideon, a *mal'akh* appears to Gideon from underneath a tree and speaks to him (Judges 6.11–13), but as the story progresses, we are told simply, “Yhwh turned to face him and said . . .” (verse 14).²² Like Abraham in Genesis 18, Gideon at first does not realize that his visitor is divine. As James Kugel observes, Gideon

is certainly unaware that this is “the angel of the LORD,” or else he would do what everyone else does in such circumstances, bow down in reverential awe. Instead, he fixes on the stranger’s pious greeting in order to give him a somewhat impious retort [which can be paraphrased]: “Oh yeah? If the LORD is with us, where is He now?” Then the angel turns to him and says, “Go in this strength of yours and save Israel yourself from the Midianites – am I not the one who is sending you?” Certainly this should have tipped him off: who could this “I” be if not God Himself? Yet it is only after the next exchange, when he is told, “But I will be with you and you will defeat the Midianites to a man,” that Gideon begins to suspect that the visitor is not an ordinary human. Even so, he is still not sure: he wants proof, a sign It is only after the flame magically consumes the offering and the angel himself disappears that Gideon’s moment of confusion may truly be said to be over.²³

The reader may share some of Gideon's confusion. The text variously identifies the speaker as Yhwh (verses 14, 16) and Yhwh's *mal'akh* (12, 20, 21). Indeed, Gideon's visitor sometimes speaks in the first person of God (verses 14, 16) and sometimes in the third (verse 12). One might want to argue that Yhwh was located in heaven and spoke through a lower ranking divine being sent to earth with a message, but it is specifically Yhwh who turns His face toward Gideon in verse 14. At the same time, we are told (verse 22) that Gideon saw Yhwh's *mal'akh*, and even though it was Yhwh who turned to face Gideon, it was the *mal'akh* who left the place (verse 21).²⁴ The text seems self-contradictory only if one insists that an angel is a being separate from Yhwh. On the other hand, if one can understand an angel as a small-scale manifestation of God or even as a being with whom Yhwh's self overlaps, the text coheres perfectly well.

This conception of an angel as something other than a messenger in these texts has long been recognized by biblical scholars. Richard Elliot Friedman explains the theology behind these passages especially clearly:

These texts indicate that angels are . . . conceived of here as expressions of God's presence God, in this conception, can . . . make Himself known to humans by a sort of emanation from the Godhead that is visible to human eyes. It is a hypostasis, a concrete expression of the divine presence In some ways an angel is an identifiable thing itself, and in some ways it is merely a representation of divine presence in human affairs.²⁵

The expression of God's presence known as the *mal'akh* is accessible precisely because it does not encompass God's entirety. "The angel," James Kugel writes, "is not some lesser order of divine being; it is God Himself, but God unrecognized, God intruding into ordinary reality."²⁶ Similarly, S. A. Meier has pointed out that the ancient Greek and Latin translations of these biblical passages sometimes include the word "angel" where the standard text preserved in Jewish tradition (the Masoretic text, or MT) merely reads "Yhwh." Sometimes the translations drop "angel" where it is present in the MT.²⁷ These textual variations strengthen the impression that the boundary between angel and Yhwh was regarded in the texts underlying the translations as indistinct.²⁸

At first glance, the relationship between Yhwh and angels in these passages appears baffling. Yet these passages can be readily understood as examples of the fluidity of divine selfhood so common in the ancient Near East. Yhwh could be present in a body (or perhaps several bodies) resembling that of a human, but this was not Yhwh's only body. Angels, in some biblical passages, were part of God, though not all of God. They may have acted separately from Yhwh; after all, the divine being in Genesis 32 was unable to tarry on earth once the sun rose, which is not the case for Yhwh Himself in other passages, such as Genesis 3 or 18. But

to some degree, they also overlapped with God and could even be referred to as Yhwh.

MULTIPLICITY OF DIVINE EMBODIMENT IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

I need not pause to demonstrate that Israelites believed Yhwh dwelt in heaven. Many biblical verses confirm that this notion typifies ancient Israelite theologies.²⁹ However, I hope to show that some Israelites believed that Yhwh, like the deities of Mesopotamia and Canaan, could also be present in more than one specific location on earth – as well as on a throne in heaven – at any given time. Thus a biblical text can speak in a single breath of God being present both on earth and in heaven. Psalm 20 asks God to send help from the sanctuary at Zion (verse 3), where the supplicant offers a gift (verse 4), but this text goes on to describe God as responding to the plea from a palace in heaven (verse 7). This psalm is not sloppy or vague in the way it imagines God; rather, the psalmist, following a pattern of thought found elsewhere in the ancient Near East, believes that God could be physically present in an earthly location and a heavenly one as well. If a deity can be present in many particular locations on earth at once, of course the deity can also be present in a heavenly body at the same time as well.

God's Presence in Wood

We saw above that Hebrew texts discovered at Kuntillet Ajrud may allude to the fragmentation of Yhwh into local manifestations. Of even greater interest in these eighth-century inscriptions is the term that follows the references to Yhwh of Teman and Samaria. The first pithos from Kuntillet Ajrud reads ברכת אהכם ליהוה שמרן ולאשרתה (“I bless you to Yhwh of Samaria and His *’asherah*”); the second, ברכתך ליהוה תמן ולאשרתה (“I bless you to Yhwh of Teman and His *’asherah*”). The inscription on the bench of the gate shrine there simply reads ליהוה תמן ולאשרתה (“[Belonging] to Yhwh of Teman and His *’asherah*”). The crucial term in all these texts is אשרתה, the exact translation of which has been a matter of great controversy ever since the discovery of these texts. Similar language also appears in a Judean inscription discovered in Khirbet el-Qom, a location west of Hebron, which dates to the second half of the eighth century. The relevant lines of the partially broken inscription read, ברך אריהו ליהוה ומצריה לאשרתה הושע לה... ולאשרתה (“Blessed be Uriyahu to Yhwh! Save him [or: He saved him] from his enemies by means of His *’asherah*... and by His *’asherah*”).³⁰

The term *’asherah* that appears in all three inscriptions recalls the name of the Northwest Semitic goddess Asherah.³¹ A goddess with this name is frequently mentioned in the texts from Ugarit (where her name usually appears as *’Athirat* or *’Athirat Yammi*; the former is an exact linguistic equivalent of the Hebrew “Asherah”). The term *’asherah* appears often in the Hebrew Bible as well, but

scholars have debated whether it refers there to the goddess or to a particular type of cultic object, which consisted of a wooden pole or a tree. Devotion to this goddess is known to have declined precipitously in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages among Northwest Semites generally.³² Consequently, some scholars wonder whether the Israelites could have known of the goddess's existence. The Ugaritic texts that discuss her date to the late Bronze Age (roughly the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E.) and were unknown to the Israelites, who flourished in the Iron Age. Indeed, in biblical texts, the context suggests that the term almost always refers not to the goddess but to a cult object.

In a small but to my mind undeniable number of biblical texts, however, the word does refer to the goddess.³³ The clearest example is 1 Kings 18.19.³⁴ There the prophet Elijah challenges King Ahab with the words, "So now, bring all the Israelites to Mount Carmel for me, along with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah who are fed by Queen Jezebel." Like Baal, the word *'asherah* here clearly refers to a deity who is believed to communicate with prophets, not to a piece of cultic paraphernalia. (Many scholars dismiss this verse, arguing that it is a gloss added by a later scribe, rather than the original author of the passage.³⁵ These scholars attempt to remove this verse from the discussion of whether the goddess Asherah was known to the Israelites, but their point is irrelevant: Even if it was a glossator who added the words in question, that glossator clearly knew of a goddess named Asherah.³⁶ Hence the verse does provide evidence that at least some Israelites in the Iron Age could use the term as a proper noun, rather than as a reference to the cult object. Similarly, some scholars argue that the point of this verse is to demonstrate that Asherah is powerless,³⁷ but the fact remains that the verse in question shows that Israelites were aware that the term *'asherah* could refer to a goddess, albeit one the author or glossator in question considered to be impotent or illusory.) Another verse in which the term most likely refers to a goddess is 2 Kings 23.4, where it appears in parallel to the god Baal and the host of heaven, a group of divinities.³⁸

Although the biblical record is difficult to interpret, the archaeological record almost certainly provides evidence that some Israelites regarded the goddess Asherah as Yhwh's wife. In the Appendix I discuss a tenth-century cult stand from the Israelite town of Ta'anakh that includes a clear anthropomorphic representation of this goddess along with symbolic, nonanthropomorphic representations of Yhwh (see pp. 155–9.). In light of all this evidence, it is safest to conclude that for Israelites in the Iron Age the term אֲשֵׁרָה usually referred to a wooden object used in worship but that it could also denote a particular goddess.

The question for our purposes, then, is whether the term אֲשֵׁרָתָה (*'asherato* – that is, the word *'asherah*, to which a third masculine singular pronominal suffix meaning "His" has been attached) in the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions refers to the goddess or to the more commonly known wooden pole or tree. Two considerations lead to the conclusion that the inscriptions intend the

latter. First, a number of scholars have demonstrated, to my mind conclusively, that the term אֲשֶׁרָה cannot mean “His Asherah” – that is, it cannot consist of the goddess’s name with the suffix for “His” attached as a pronominal suffix. Pronominal suffixes never attach to proper names in Hebrew or other Canaanite languages.³⁹ Second, it is fascinating to note that the Kuntillet Ajrud inscription is not the only text that associates Yhwh, *’asherah*, and Samaria; 2 Kings 13.6 does so as well.⁴⁰ That verse reports that King Jehoahaz, the son of Jehu, “did not abandon the sins of Jeroboam’s dynasty, which caused Israel to sin; they followed them; and even the *’asherah* remained in Samaria.” This verse not only informs us about Jehoahaz’s reign but also tells us something about his father, King Jehu. We learned earlier, in 2 Kings 10, that after Jehu deposed King Ahab and his Phoenician consort Jezebel (who were notorious devotees of the cult of Baal), Jehu conducted a thorough-going reform of the Israelite temple in Samaria. He removed all elements of non-Yhwhistic worship there and massacred those who were loyal to Baal. But, it turns out in 2 Kings 13.6, the *’asherah* remained in the temple in spite of Jehu’s purge. In the eyes of the zealously monotheistic or monolatrous King Jehu, then, the *’asherah* was not objectionable. If Jehu did not destroy the *’asherah* in the course of his purge, then he must have regarded it as acceptable to Yhwh. Two conclusions follow: (1) The *’asherah* to which 2 Kings 13.6 refers cannot be the name of another deity or an item that symbolizes or incarnates her, because Jehu believed Yhwh to forbid any worship of other deities. (2) The term in this verse must refer to a cultic object sacred to Yhwh.⁴¹ What was true of one text that associates the terms Yhwh, Samaria, and *’asherah* (that is, 2 Kings 13) is at least possible for another (the Kuntillet Ajrud inscription). The term *’asherah* in these eighth-century inscriptions, in short, does not refer to the goddess of that name. This does not mean, of course, that no Israelites worshipped her. In fact, the evidence of the Ta’anakh cult stand I mentioned earlier (which dates from two centuries earlier than the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions) leads to the conclusion that some Israelites did once worship the goddess Asherah. But this does not mean that the authors of the inscriptions used the term to refer to the goddess. Rather, the term in these inscriptions must refer to the cultic object, about which more needs to be said.

The *’asherah* as cultic object consisted of a live tree, a tree stump, or a wooden pole.⁴² Illustrations of such sacred trees are found on a great many Israelite and Phoenician seals.⁴³ The *’asherah* is often mentioned alongside a stone pillar or stele called the מצבה (*maṣṣebah*; the plural form is *maṣṣebot*) in the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., Exodus 34.13; Deuteronomy 15.21–2; 1 Kings 14.23; 2 Kings 17.10; and 2 Chronicles 31.1). Phoenician sources also link sacred trees and stelae. Coins from the Phoenician city of Tyre dating to the Hellenistic period depict two stelae sacred to the god Melkart alongside a tree in Melkart’s temple.⁴⁴ The Hellenistic-Phoenician author Philo of Byblos mentions stelae and wooden staves (ῥάβδους) together. He informs us that Phoenicians consecrated them both to the names of the gods.⁴⁵ An *’asherah*

may have been located alongside a tenth-century B.C.E. *maṣṣebah* uncovered by archaeologists in the Judean city of Lachish.⁴⁶ In light of the previous chapter's discussion of stelae endowed with divine presence, the frequent connection of sacred trees with such stelae is, to say the least, suggestive. It is altogether likely that this tree or pole was originally seen as an embodiment of the goddess Asherah in Bronze Age Canaan, just as stelae and betyls* embodied El, Baal, and other gods. (It is no coincidence that the phallic stone stelae were associated with male deities and the [once-]verdant 'asherah trees were associated with a female one.⁴⁷) Nevertheless, there is no indication that the 'asherahs mentioned in the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions were sacred to that goddess. As we have seen, the cult of Asherah had declined among Northwest Semites generally long before the composition of these inscriptions. Further, none of the Hebrew inscriptions that mention the 'asherah refer to any deity other than Yhwh, and the verbs attached to the divine sphere in these inscriptions are always in the masculine singular: In pithos 2 from Kuntillet Ajrud, the inscription reads, יִשְׁמְרֶךָ וַיְהִי עִמָּךְ . . . יְבָרְכֶךָ (“may He bless and keep you, and may He be with . . .”), and in pithos 3, it reads, וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ יְהוָה (“may Yahu give him . . .”).⁴⁸ Both these data suggest that the inscriptions have only one deity in mind. As a result, it is likely that in Israel by the eighth century Yhwh had taken over cultic objects associated with Asherah's cult, and the authors of these inscriptions referred to Yhwh's 'asherah-pole as a cult object belonging to that God.⁴⁹ The two 'asherahs mentioned in the Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi were almost certainly located in the sanctuaries of Yhwh in Samaria and Teman, respectively. These inscriptions, then, probably assume that the 'asherah is sacred to Yhwh rather than to any other deity.⁵⁰

In light of the evidence presented in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that the 'asherah mentioned on these inscriptions may have been regarded as an incarnation of Yhwh comparable to the *šalmu* in Mesopotamia and the betyl and *maṣṣebah* among Canaanites and Arameans. (We can only speculate on how an object that was an incarnation of the goddess Asherah later became an incarnation of Yhwh. We saw in the [previous chapter](#) that the goddesses Tannit and Astarte were seen as aspects of the gods Baal and El; similarly, Asherah may once have been an aspect of El or even Yhwh. As a result, her cult symbol or incarnation could have come to be regarded as a incarnation of the high God Himself.) Evidence for this possibility comes from the role that the pithoi attribute to the 'asherah, for worshippers approach Yhwh through the 'asherah. The human speakers or writers of these inscriptions consistently “bless” another person to Yhwh and His 'asherah; this is the case in the pithoi from Kuntillet Ajrud and in the inscription from Khirbet el-Qom.⁵¹ As a result, scholars have claimed that in these inscriptions the 'asherah mediates the blessings of Yhwh.⁵² This is a misleading formulation. It is more accurate to say that the 'asherah, together with Yhwh, *receives* the blessings of

* On this term, which means a stone animated by the living presence of a deity, see [Chapter 1](#), p. 28.

the humans who pray, whereas Yhwh alone *bestows* blessings on humans. Whenever Yhwh is the subject of the verb “bless” or any other verb in these inscriptions, the verb is singular. Yhwh acts alone, and the *’asherah* does not take any action alongside Yhwh or independently of Him.⁵³ For example, the speaker in the second pithos first blesses his lord to Yhwh and His *’asherah* and then states,]יברך וישמרך ויהי עם.אד[נ]י (“May He bless and protect you and be with my lord”). That the verbs here are in the singular is indicated especially clearly by the jussive form of the verb יהי, which is spelled ויהי (“may He be with my lord”) – not the plural ויהיו (which would mean “may they [i.e., Yhwh and His *’asherah*] be with my lord”).⁵⁴ Similarly, another fragment of the second pithos mentions Yhwh of Teman and His *’asherah* as well as a particular Israelite man. That text goes on to say, ונתן לה יהו כלבבה (“may Yahu give to him what he desires”). Here again, the verb (ונתן – “he shall give”) is singular.⁵⁵ In both these texts, then, human beings can bless other humans “to” Yhwh and His *’asherah* (or perhaps, *through* Yhwh and His *’asherah*, or *by means of* them). Only Yhwh *gives* blessings, however, and the *’asherah* does not act alongside Yhwh as an independent being; indeed, the *’asherah* does not act at all.⁵⁶ It is likely that *’asherahs* were considered to incarnate part of Yhwh, because human beings directed prayers toward Yhwh through them. Nonetheless, this particular incarnation is a less active one than those found outside Israel in that it did not act on its own. One might contrast these eighth-century Israelite *’asherahs*, for example, with “the image of Baal” (סמל בעל) mentioned in a first-century C.E. Phoenician inscription from Byblos.⁵⁷ There, the symbol offers blessing alongside Baal: The human speaker in that inscription hopes that “our lord and the image of Baal will bless and give life” (יברך ויחיו). The spelling of the second verb (with its final *waw*) indicates that the verbs are plural, not singular. In Phoenician Byblos, the divine symbol takes action, but in Israelite Kuntillet Ajrud, the *’asherah* does not.

In short, the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom do not support the thesis that Israelites worshipped the goddess Asherah in the eighth century. Although some of their forebears had regarded Asherah as Yhwh’s wife, by the eighth century these Israelites seem to have worshipped Yhwh alone. At least for the authors of these inscriptions, the artifacts and perhaps even the divine roles once associated with the goddess Asherah had been transferred to Yhwh.

Evidence that some Israelites viewed their God as becoming manifest in a tree is not limited to these inscriptions. This notion is hinted at in biblical texts as well. Deuteronomy 33.16 refers to Yhwh as שֶׁכֵּן סִנְיָה – “the one who dwells in a bush.” The same notion may also lie behind the story in Exodus 3–4, in which Yhwh or a part of Yhwh is present in the form of fire in a bush. Significantly, Exodus 3.2 refers to the presence in the bush as a *mal’akh*, a term that, we have seen, sometimes refers to a manifestation or small-scale embodiment of part of Yhwh.⁵⁸ Thus it may be significant that the *mal’akh* who appeared to Gideon manifested itself under a turpentine tree (also known as a terebinth tree) in Judges 6.11. Other types of trees,

too, may have been regarded as sacred trees comparable to *'asherahs*⁵⁹; JE does not hesitate to note that Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba to invoke the name of Yhwh-El-Olam there (Genesis 21.33, a J text).

This verse prompts the question: Was it impossible to invoke this God without an object in which He could become physically present? Such trees are regarded as proper and nonpagan by some monotheistic biblical characters and authors. We have already noted that King Ahab erected an *'asherah* in Samaria and also a temple to Baal (1 Kings 16.23–33); later, the strongly Yhwhistic king Jehu destroyed the temple to Baal, but we are never told that he removed the *'asherah* (2 Kings 9–10).⁶⁰ Similarly, prophets who worked in the north condemn the worship of Baal there, but not the *'asherah*. Consequently, Saul Olyan argues persuasively that at least some Israelites regarded the *'asherah* as a legitimate part of Yhwh's cult.⁶¹

God's Presence in Stone

Biblical texts indicate that divine embodiment was possible not only in wood but also in stone.⁶² One case is found in a set of biblical texts that purport to describe the patriarchal period⁶³: Genesis 28.16–19, 31.13, and 35.14, all of which stem from JE.⁶⁴ In the first of these, Jacob woke up after seeing a vision of a stairway reaching from heaven to earth. Then, Genesis 28.18–19 inform us, “he took the stone he had set beneath his head, and set it up as a *maṣṣebah*.⁶⁵ He poured oil on it, and he called the place a betyl (בֵּית אֵל).” Similarly, in Genesis 35.14–15 Jacob set up a stele, poured wine and oil on it, and called the place a betyl. The ritual use of oil is significant in these two verses. In Israelite religion, to pour oil on an object or person is to change its status; for example, one becomes king or high priest when one is anointed with oil.⁶⁶ Is it possible that, in these passages, anointing transforms the stele and thus functions in a manner comparable to the *mīs pî* ritual in Mesopotamia?⁶⁷ If so, what had been a mere stone becomes a *maṣṣebah* or betyl, a place of divine dwelling; or, if we may borrow the language of Philo of Byblos cited in the previous chapter, once Jacob anointed the stone, it was endowed with life.⁶⁸

Jacob's decision to pour oil on top of a rock was neither random nor unique. It recalls a Northwest Semitic ritual associated with sacred stelae. This ritual is attested in texts that describe how to install a high priestess in the temple of Baal Hadad in Emar. (The text describing the ritual is in Akkadian, but the rituals reflect the Northwest Semitic culture of Emar, in which the Canaanite/Aramean god Baal Hadad was worshipped.) During the fourth day of the ceremonies, we are told, “the high priestess shall pour fine oil over the tip of the stele (*sikkānu*) of Ḫēbat.”⁶⁹ (The goddess Ḫēbat is the consort of Hadad in these texts.) The same type of fine oil had just been used to anoint the high priestess herself.⁷⁰ The oil rendered this woman the new high priestess, just as oil was poured over Yhwh's new high priest or a new king according to biblical texts. This fine oil may similarly have had a

transformative role when it was poured on the stele, especially because this sort of oil was otherwise rarely used in the installation festival.⁷¹ The anointing may have been intended to renew or fortify the goddess's presence during the installation of her spouse's high priest. At the very least, the parallel between the anointing of a stele in the two texts demonstrates that Jacob's action needs to be understood in a larger context of biblical and ancient Near Eastern evidence, all of which begins to suggest a parallel with the Mesopotamian *mīs pī* rituals.⁷²

The possibility that Jacob rendered an inert rock into an animate betyl is strengthened by Genesis 31.13.⁷³ There God appeared to Jacob and said, אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל בֵּית־אֵל אֲשֶׁר מִשַׁחְתָּ שָׁם מִצְבָּה. We might translate this verse, "I am the God in the betyl that you anointed into a stele there."⁷⁴ In this case, the presence of God in the betyl is made explicit, and the verb מִשַׁח takes a double accusative to indicate its transformative nature. Alternatively, we might render it, "I am the God Bethel whom you anointed there in the stele." The God who became incarnate in the betyl takes the divine name Bethel because He is identical with the cult stele known by that name. Here again, the presence of God in the object is stressed. To be sure, the evidence is not clear cut. One might prefer reading בֵּית אֵל in all these texts as a place name rather than as "betyl"; indeed, Genesis 28.19 and 35.6 identify this place with the city of Luz, also known as Bethel, home of one of the northern kingdom's major temples. But this third possibility does not contradict the first two. Luz came to be known as Bethel precisely because of the betyl Jacob set up there; it became the temple city because God, manifesting Himself as Bethel, was already present there in an old betyl.⁷⁵ Moreover, in Genesis 28.22, it is not the place but the stele itself that is identified as בֵּית אֱלֹהִים; the text is concerned with the stone, not just, or even primarily, with the city.⁷⁶ The confluence of terms and motifs in all three of these texts suggests the possibility that some Israelites understood stelae or betyls to incarnate their deity.⁷⁷

Finally, we should note that the deuteronomistic historians provide ample evidence that some Israelites placed statues of Yhwh in their sanctuaries. As H. W. F. Saggs notes,

In the northern kingdom there were, quite apart from the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, images at Yhwh's local shrines (2 Kings 17.12, 15–16); the Yhwhism-as-it-should-have-been school [that is, the deuteronomistic historians responsible for these reports in Kings] attributes these to Baalism, but the whole weight of the biblical evidence makes it clear that these were regarded by the worshipers as part of the cult of Yhwh, not of a separate deity Baal, who had his own distinct temples and shrines (2 Kings 10.21; 11.18). Moreover, it cannot be claimed that images were limited to the northern kingdom, for there is a specific statement that they existed in Judah at the time of Josiah; they are mentioned along with the teraphim, with nothing to support the common assumption that they had been introduced by Manasseh and belonged to a cult other than that of Yhwh (2 Kings 23.24; see also Isaiah 30.22; Jeremiah 7.30).⁷⁸

The deuteronomists disapprove of these practices and therefore claim they exemplify Canaanite syncretism. This portrayal of such practices does not overturn the fact that some pious devotees of Yhwh in ancient Israel performed them in good faith. Given the standard understanding of temple statues among the Mesopotamians and Canaanites who were the Israelites' ancestors and neighbors, it seems altogether likely that these statues were regarded as incarnations of Yhwh rather than mere representations.⁷⁹

Openness to divine manifestation in stone appears elsewhere as well. A very early poem, Genesis 49.24, may recall the notion of Yhwh's embodiment in stelae or betyls when it refers to God as the "stone of Israel."⁸⁰ In Exodus 24.4 the E narrator does not hesitate to inform us that no less a cultural hero than Moses set up twelve *maṣṣebot* at Sinai. Similarly, Joshua erects twelve stones in Joshua 4.20. That twelve were erected is itself revealing: The function of these stelae did not need to be limited to a single stone. Given the conception of multiple embodiment associated with these stelae, we should not be startled that a single god would be embodied in more than one stone. If Yhwh could be present in one *maṣṣebah* or *'asherah* in Samaria and another in Hebron, why could Yhwh not be present in two or twelve of them in a single location?⁸¹ In Joshua 24.26 Joshua sets up a large stone under an oak. The appearance of a tree and a pillar together recalls the connection of these objects as incarnations of divinity in Northwest Semitic religions generally. Moreover, the stone is said to "hear" a prayer: "Joshua said to the people, 'This stone will be a witness among us, for it has heard (היא שמעה) all Yhwh's statements which He said to us'" (Joshua 24.27).⁸² The stone's auditory ability suggests that it has become what Philo of Byblos would call a stone endowed with life or spirit and that it resembles the Mesopotamian *ṣalmu*. (This stone pillar at Shechem and the tree under which it sits are mentioned together again in Judges 9.6.⁸³) Shechem was associated with God's presence already in Genesis 12.6–7, according to which God manifested Himself to Abraham there in a turpentine tree (אֵלֶּן): "Abram passed through the land until he arrived at Shechem, at the tree of guidance (אֵלֶּן מוֹדֵד) – and the Canaanites were still in the land then – and Yhwh manifested Himself to Abram and said, 'I shall give this land to your descendants.' Abram built an altar there to Yhwh, who manifested Himself to him" (Genesis 12.6–7). All these texts suggest that sacred stones, like the sacred wood with which they were associated, were regarded as legitimate embodiments in some Yhwhistic circles in early Israel.

Some texts may even suggest that God could be present in an altar (as opposed to a stele). Genesis 33.20 (an E verse) reads, וַיִּצְבֹּב שָׁם מוֹזֵבֶה וַיִּקְרָאֵלֹהוּ אֵל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – "He set up an altar there and called it 'El, the God of Israel.'" In this verse, Jacob seems to call the altar itself by the name "El, God of Israel," apparently indicating that "the stone [was] identified with the deity."⁸⁴ Ancient translators of scripture, including the Septuagint and various Targumim, get rid of this oddity. For the second half of the verse LXX reads ἐπεκαλέσατο τὸν θεὸν Ἰσραηλ – "He invoked

the God of Israel,” leaving out any equivalent for the Hebrew’s לו (“it” in “he called it”).⁸⁵ But in light of the tendency of JE verses to view stones as incarnations of God, this verse need not be seen as an oddity at all, especially when we recall that some altars were simply stones (see Judges 6.20, 13.19). God may become incarnate in an altar in Judges 6.24 as well: וַיִּבֶן שָׁם גִּדְעוֹן מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא-לוֹ הַשְּׁלוֹם – “Gideon built an altar there to Yhwh and called it ‘Yhwh who is peace (*shalom*).’”⁸⁶ Here too, an ancient translation alters a text it regards as bizarre: Targum renders the verse, “Gideon built an altar there to Yhwh, and on it he worshipped Yhwh who gave him peace.” But what is reported in the MT of these verses is typical of JE in the Pentateuch and of parts of Judges as well. The notion that God is incarnate in an altar may be the reason that altars are so frequently associated with invoking God (see, e.g., Genesis 12.7).

It is significant, then, that the zealously Yhwhistic eighth-century prophet Hosea associates stelae with legitimate cultic objects such as altars and the ephod:

For many days, the children of Israel will remain
Without a king and without authorities,
Without sacrifices and without a stele,
Without ephod or teraphim.

(Hosea 3.4)

Israel is a luxurious vine that puts forth its fruit⁸⁷;
As its fruit became more abundant, so too did its altars,
As its land flourished, they cultivated stelae.
They thought themselves cunning, but now they will realize their guilt –
He will break apart their altars and destroy their stelae.

(Hosea 10.1–2)

The prophet condemns stelae, altars, and ephods in these passages, but not because he views any of them as inherently problematic. The parallel these verses draw between stelae and unquestionably legitimate objects such as the altar (and legitimate institutions such as kingship) shows that Hosea did not regard the stelae themselves as unacceptable. Rather, he believed that the sinful people were not worthy to use them. (This attitude is identical to that of the eighth-century prophets to sacrifice: The practice itself is admirable, but it is rendered unacceptable when performed by evildoers.) Hosea does, on the other hand, protest treating statues of calves as sacred objects; in all likelihood, he has in mind the calves in Dan and Bethel set up by Jeroboam (see Hosea 13.2, and cf. 1 Kings 12.28–9). Thus Hosea seems open to the notion of divine embodiment in nonrepresentational objects such as pillars and poles, but not to the notion of divine embodiment in representational sculptures. In this respect, Hosea’s view accords well with a plausible interpretation of the Second Commandment in Exodus 20.4.⁸⁸ Hosea’s view is, furthermore, an intensified variation of a perspective found among many Northwest

Semites; as Tryggve Mettinger shows, Canaanites and Arameans embraced stelae and other forms of divine incarnation in earthly objects while tending to produce relatively few sculptures of their gods.⁸⁹

What is true of Hosea is also true of the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32–3, an E text. The problem with the calf described there may not have been the notion that God was present in it or on it, but rather its representational nature. After all, according to E, Moses himself had set up (abstract, nonrepresentational) pillars only five and a half weeks earlier (see Exodus 24.4). Similarly, in 1 Kings 12 King Jeroboam, the notorious founder of the northern kingdom, sets up a calf in the temple in Bethel and another in the temple in Dan. The narrative condemns Jeroboam, but it does not describe him as a polytheist; his sins (according to the somewhat anachronistic view of the author of that chapter) consist of disloyalty to God's anointed dynasty, failure to respect the central cult in Jerusalem, and calf making. Had there been any reason to suspect him of polytheism, the historian would have been quick to condemn Jeroboam for that as well.

In light of the notion of divine fluidity embraced by the JE traditions responsible for the Golden Calf story, a famous crux that appears there disappears. Readers have long been baffled by Aaron's apparently polytheistic description of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32.4: "These are your gods, O Israel, who took you out of Egypt." The reference to gods in the plural is surprising,⁹⁰ both because Aaron is careful to make clear in 32.5 that the holiday they celebrate in front of the calf is dedicated to Yhwh and none other and because, after all, he made only one calf. One explanation for the odd phrasing employed by Aaron lies with the notion of fluidity. Because the one God has multiple bodies and manifestations, a person might refer to the manifestations in the plural without impugning the status of Yhwh as the only deity.⁹¹ There is nothing inconsistent in Aaron's assertion that the one calf embodies a multiplicity of divinity or that the festival in front of this calf honors Yhwh and no other deity. Various manifestations of Yhwh acted on earth to take Israel out of Egypt (for example, the angel in the small fire in Exodus 3–4 and also the Destroyer in Exodus 12). These manifestations are all "gods," but they are all Yhwh. Seen from within its own thought-world – the world in which God's bodies parallel God's selves – Aaron's statement is perfectly normal.⁹² Similarly, Jeroboam sets up two calves and refers to them as "gods" not because he encourages polytheism but because both calves are divine in the sense that they embody Yhwh.⁹³ One of these calves, more specifically, is a deity we can refer to as "Yhwh in Dan," and the other we can call "Yhwh in Bethel" (or simply "Bethel," another name for Yhwh in His manifestation in that locale).

In light of the biblical evidence indicating the validity of stone pillars in the cult devoted exclusively to Yhwh, it is not surprising that archaeologists have found stelae in many Israelite cult sites.⁹⁴ Among the most famous is the stele in the Shechem temple dating to the twelfth century B.C.E.⁹⁵ (Even William Dever, who is highly skeptical regarding the historical reliability of Joshua and Judges, believes

that this stele, uncovered by the archaeologist G. E. Wright in the 1960s, may be identical to the *maṣṣebah* that Joshua 24.26 and Judges 9.6 locate at Shechem.⁹⁶) Another twelfth-century example was found at the *bamah* or high place in the hill country of Ephraim and Manasseh about seven kilometers (four and a half miles) east of Dothan.⁹⁷ In the smaller of the two *bamot* at Dan, five *maṣṣebot* were found together (reminiscent of the multiple stelae set up by Moses in Exodus 24.4 and Joshua in Joshua 4.20); at least three *maṣṣebot* were also found at Dan's main city gate.⁹⁸ A single *maṣṣebah* is found in Samaria at Tell el-Far'ah, dating to some time between the tenth and eighth centuries B.C.E.⁹⁹ These examples are from the north; a southern example is the Judean temple in Arad, which was probably in use until the eighth century B.C.E. It is thought that two stelae, one large and one small, were originally located in a niche at the far end of the temple's second room (here again, the presence of more than one stele recalls Exodus 24.4 and Joshua 4.20).¹⁰⁰ Another southern example dates to the tenth through eighth centuries at Lachish; this *maṣṣebah* may have been located next to an *asherah* tree that was burned at some point, though the *maṣṣebah* remained in place.¹⁰¹ Smaller stelae also occur in what archaeologists regard as family shrines and popular high places in Tel Rehov and Tel 'Amal. William Dever maintains that these "smaller versions [are] . . . no less potent for their diminutive size . . . perhaps now being more 'intimate.'"¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

We have seen that several lines of evidence from both biblical and extra-biblical sources show that the conception of fluid divine selfhood found in Canaan and Mesopotamia was also known among Yhwhistic Israelites. This evidence comes from several sets of material: J and E texts, a narrative about a hero from the tribe of Manasseh (Judges 6), an eighth-century poem from northern Israel (Hosea 12.4–5), and eighth-century inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud. These texts, of course, do not speak of Yhwh overlapping with another deity altogether (as Ea overlaps with Marduk, for example, in *Enuma Elish*). That form of fluidity was impossible in the monotheistic worldview of these texts, which never mention a deity other than Yhwh and Yhwh's various manifestations. But these texts do speak of Yhwh as fragmenting into local manifestations, and they do depict emanations of Yhwh's presence into *mal'akhim* who were part of God but not all of God. Several of these texts tend to locate the fluidity tradition in the patriarchal narratives and thus to connect it either with the earliest period of Israelite history or with the realm of family piety, which the Bible often portrays through narratives describing the patriarchs.¹⁰³

Similarly, considerable evidence shows that some Yhwhistic Israelites embraced the notion of divine embodiment in multiple earthly objects. Significantly, much of the evidence for this attitude comes from precisely the same group of texts that

embrace fluid divine selfhood, thus confirming the basic parallel we are noting between attitudes to body and to self: a number of JE texts,¹⁰⁴ the eighth-century inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, the Book of Hosea, and old poems preserved in Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33. (We might also add to this list the northern traditions underlying the story of Jeroboam's calves in 1 Kings 12.) As was the case with fluid identity, these texts tend to associate the multiple embodiment with an early period of Israelite history and/or with the realm of family piety, expressed with reference to the eras of the patriarchs and of Moses.

It is of considerable import that these conceptions of the divine – fluidity of self and multiplicity of embodiment – appear in the same sets of texts. Indeed, the two conceptions come together in Genesis 31.11–13 and 48.15–16. In the former, Jacob recounts a dream, saying, “The *mal'akh* of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob! . . . I am the God in the betyl . . . [or: I am the God Bethel].’” These verses from Genesis 31 identify the God embodied in the betyl with the deity whose self overlaps with or manifests itself through the *mal'akh*. Thus, they make explicit the link I have posited between the notions of multiple embodiment and fluid selfhood. At the end of his life, Jacob again identifies the deity who saved him at Bethel as a *mal'akh*:

[Jacob] blessed Joseph and said:

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac were steadfast,
The one who shepherded me from the beginning of my life until today,
The *mal'akh* who saved me from all misfortune –
May He bless these lads.

(Genesis 48.15–16)

By now, it is no surprise to see that the parallelism of these poetic lines (God . . . || God . . . || The *mal'akh* . . .) demonstrates that Jacob equates God with a *mal'akh*¹⁰⁵; this is just another example of the phenomenon of the small-scale manifestation of God discussed earlier. Of greater importance is the plausible suggestion of several scholars that the *mal'akh* Jacob mentions here is the same one he referred to in Genesis 31.13 and 35.4 (the only *mal'akh* associated with Jacob). It follows that the *mal'akh* is the same being he identified as the deity in the betyl he set up in Genesis 28.17–19, because 31.13 and 35.3 connect the *mal'akh* with the betyl.¹⁰⁶ This group of related verses tell us that the deity present in a betyl is none other than a *mal'akh*. Here, the ideas of multiple embodiment and fluid selfhood show themselves to be one and the same. God, as present in a betyl, is a *mal'akh*: The stele contains the presence of God on a scale safely accessible to a human being.¹⁰⁷ These verses confirm my thesis that these two perceptions of divinity parallel and reinforce each other. In fact, they are simply two instances of a single theological intuition.

The same equation also occurs in Hosea 12.4–6. We saw earlier that Hosea 12.4 provides another example of the *mal'akh* who is a small-scale manifestation of Yhwh; we can now note in addition that it identifies that *mal'akh* with Yhwh's presence in the betyl:

In the womb he [Jacob] cheated his brother,
 And as a grown man he wrestled with God.
 He wrestled with a *mal'akh* and endured,
 He cried and pleaded with him,¹⁰⁸
 It was Bethel who met him,¹⁰⁹
 There He spoke with him –¹¹⁰
 It was Yhwh, the God of hosts! Yhwh is His name.
 (Hosea 12.4–6)

These verses present a series of identifications: First, the *mal'akh* with whom Jacob wrestled at Penuel on his trip back to Canaan was identical to Bethel, the deity in the betyl with whom Jacob spoke when he fled from Canaan years earlier.¹¹¹ Second, Bethel (which is to say, the *mal'akh*) is none other than Yhwh.¹¹² Like the verses in Genesis, this passage attests to the nexus of the two notions that have concerned us: multiplicity of divine embodiment and fluidity of divine selfhood.¹¹³

These twin conceptions seem to have been especially at home in northern Israel. The caravan station in Kunillet Ajrud was probably established by northern Israelites, not southern Judeans.¹¹⁴ The stories about Jacob's stele provide an etiology for one of the main cultic centers of the northern kingdom, the Ephraimite temple of Bethel. The story about Jacob's struggle with a divine being who overlapped with Yhwh takes place at Penuel, a site that belonged to the northern kingdom, and this story appears not only in JE but also in the work of Hosea, a northern prophet. This conception of the *mal'akh* also appears in a story about Gideon, a hero from the northern tribe of Manasseh who lived in Ofrah.¹¹⁵ Jehu, the zealous Yhwhistic king who countenanced *'asherahs*, ruled over the northern kingdom. He must have had many *maṣṣebot* to countenance too; the vast majority of stelae discovered in Israelite sites are from the north: Shechem, Dothan, Dan, Tel el-Far'ah, Megiddo, Tel Reḥov, and Tel 'Amal. Deuteronomy 33.16 and Genesis 49.24, which give evidence for divine embodiment in trees and stelae, are poems about Joseph and the tribes descended from him, and hence they are surely of northern (more specifically, Ephraimite) provenance. The evidence is not exclusively northern, to be sure: Khirbet el-Qom (where one of the inscriptions referring to Yhwh's *'asherah* was found) is in the south, just west of Hebron; two *maṣṣebot* were found in Arad, in the southern reaches of Judah; and the JE texts in the form we know from the Pentateuch are almost certainly from Jerusalem.¹¹⁶ But the skewing of the evidence toward the north is noteworthy, especially in light of the fact that so few northern texts are preserved in the Bible at all. These related

conceptions of divinity were known throughout ancient Israel, but they seem to have been weaker in Judah.

Two other sets of texts that stem from Judah knew of these conceptions as well, but they rejected them completely. The priestly and deuteronomic traditions refuse to discuss fluidity of selfhood, and they condemn multiplicity of embodiment. The story of their theologies concerns us in the next chapter.



The Rejection of the Fluidity Model in Ancient Israel

THE THEOLOGICAL INTUITION THAT HAS CONCERNED US WAS FOUND AMONG the polytheists of the ancient Near East and also among worshippers of Yhwh in ancient Israel: A god – even the one God – could have many bodies and a fluid self. Israelites who accepted this premise included the biblical authors responsible for the Pentateuch’s JE narratives and various scribes and poets with some connection to the northern kingdom. Other Israelites, however, rejected these notions. Certain streams of tradition in the Hebrew Bible display no sense that divine selfhood could fragment. These same traditions regard divine embodiment as fixed, and they strongly condemn the stelae and *’asherahs* so crucial to the notion of multiplicity of divine embodiment. I focus the discussion in this chapter on two such streams of tradition: deuteronomistic texts and priestly texts. (By “deuteronomistic texts,” I mean both the Book of Deuteronomy and the historical works that reflect its ideology: to wit, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.¹ The term “priestly texts” for the purposes of this book include all the priestly material in the Pentateuch – both the older PT scrolls and the later HS additions to them²; when referring to this priestly material in its final form, I sometimes use the siglum “P.” I also use the term “priestly texts” to refer to the Book of Ezekiel, because Ezekiel was a priest and his book’s ideological and stylistic affinity to priestly texts in the Pentateuch are well known.)

In their discussions of the nature of God, priestly and deuteronomistic texts employ several technical terms found elsewhere in the Bible, and it will be useful to discuss these terms before turning directly to the rejection of the fluidity model in priestly and deuteronomistic texts.

GOD’S NAME AND GOD’S GLORY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Priestly and deuteronomistic traditions make distinctive use of two terms that refer to divine presence in various parts of the Hebrew Bible: כבוד (*kabod*, usually translated as “Glory”) appears often in the former, and שם (*shem*, or “name”) in the latter. To understand how these traditions take up these terms, it is necessary to review how other biblical texts use them. Outside the priestly and deuteronomistic traditions, these terms can refer to some type of divine manifestation or some attribute closely aligned with God’s self, but the exact nature of the connection between God and these manifestations or attributes is difficult to characterize.

The term “name” in ancient Near Eastern cultures can refer to the essence of any thing and hence can be a cipher for the thing itself.³ Examples of the identity of God and God’s name in biblical literature abound. The synonymous parallelism of God and God’s name in many poetic texts attests to this identity:

He will stand and shepherd by means of the might of Yhwh,
By means of the splendor of Yhwh’s name.

(Micah 5.3)

Let me acknowledge Yhwh for His righteousness,
Let me sing a hymn to the name of Yhwh, the Most High.

(Psalm 7.18)

Let my mouth utter praise to Yhwh,
And let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever.

(Psalm 145.21)⁴

Similarly, in Jeremiah 14.9 the presence of God in the people’s midst is equated with God’s *shem*: “You are in our midst (בְּקִרְבָּנוּ), O Yhwh; we are called by Your Name (וְשִׁמְךָ עָלֵינוּ נִקְרָא)!”⁵

Yet *shem* or Name can also refer to a hypostasis, a quality or attribute of a particular being that becomes distinct from that being but never entirely independent of it.⁶ In many texts, God’s *shem* embodies but does not exhaust God’s self, and it also maintains some degree of separate identity. Texts that use the term this way give witness to the fluidity of divine selfhood so common in the ancient Near East. We noted in the [previous chapter](#) that Exodus 23.20–2 portrays God as sending an angel (*mal’akh*) to accompany the Israelites to their land. God tells Moses to obey the *mal’akh*, because “My *shem* is in it.” This *mal’akh* is the sort I discussed in the [previous chapter](#) – not quite a separate being but a small-scale manifestation of God. At times, the divine *shem* is sufficiently material to be the subject of its own verbs of motion. In Isaiah 30.27 it moves on its own: הִנֵּה שְׁמֵהּ בָּא מִמֶּרְחֶק בְּעֵר אֶפֶס וְכֶבֶד מִשָּׁאָה – “The *shem* of Yhwh comes from afar, burning in anger, with a weighty load.”⁷ It is difficult to say whether “the Name of Yhwh” here means “the LORD Himself” or whether the poem distances God slightly from this angry theophany, implying that only a part of God’s self will become manifest.⁸ Significantly, God’s *shem* can manifest itself at more than one location. According to Exodus 20.24, the Israelites are to construct altars “in all the locations where I cause My *shem* to be mentioned.”⁹ Thus the notion of *shem* reflects the possibility of a fragmented divine self and its physical manifestation in multiple bodies. In short, *shem* functions outside deuteronomic and priestly texts both as a synonym for God and as a hypostasis or emanation of God that is not quite a separate deity.

A similar ambiguity can be found in many uses of the term *kabod*.¹⁰ The word *kabod* in biblical Hebrew can simply mean “body, substance.”¹¹ Especially clear cases of this meaning are found in several cases of poetic parallelism:

It will come to pass at that time:
Jacob’s *kabod* will wither,
And the fat on his flesh will waste away.
(Isaiah 17.4)

Therefore my heart rejoices,
My *kabod* delights,
Indeed, my flesh remains confident.
(Psalm 16.9)

Several other texts use the term in the same manner: These include Genesis 49.6, Psalm 7.6, and Isaiah 10.3–4, 10.16, and 22.18. Consequently, one might suppose that Yhwh’s *kabod* can simply refer to God’s body.

Biblical texts that use the term *kabod* to refer to God’s physical presence do not all imagine the *kabod* as having any one form, appearance, or size.¹² Nevertheless, many Israelites (like their Mesopotamian neighbors) conceived of the divine body as stunningly bright or surrounded by an extraordinary radiance.¹³ Consequently, we would expect the *kabod* or God’s body to be made of or surrounded by an intense fire.¹⁴ Indeed, the *kabod* is clearly a substantial, blazing thing in the old fragment preserved in 1 Kings 8.11–12: “The priests could not stand to serve because of the cloud, for Yhwh’s *kabod* had filled Yhwh’s house. Then Solomon said, ‘Yhwh resolved to dwell in the dark mist.’” The *kabod* is surrounded by a cloud of smoke that protects people nearby, in this case preventing the priests from entering the sanctuary. Similarly, the *kabod* must refer to God’s body in Exodus 33.18–23: It moves, and it has a face (פנים), a hand (כף), and a back (אחור).¹⁵ (It is not clear in this passage, however, whether *kabod* is extraordinarily bright.¹⁶)

Some translators evade the anthropomorphism involved in recognizing that *kabod* means God’s body by translating it as “Presence” or “divine Presence” instead (see, for example, NJPS), but as David Aaron has noted, the phrase “divine Presence” does not adequately translate the term *kabod* in these verses (or, for that matter, anywhere else). Aaron points out that such a translation makes no sense in Exodus 33.18, in which Moses requests to see God’s *kabod*: “What could the ancients have meant by ‘seeing a Presence?’ . . . Why would someone standing in the presence of someone else request to see their ‘presence?’”¹⁷ Rather, the term must refer to a body that is somehow hidden from sight of those nearby – that is, to the dangerously visible body surrounded by the cloud that prevents those nearby from seeing it directly. The cloud encircling the *kabod* is in fact mentioned explicitly in the continuation of this passage in Exodus 34.5. In short, God’s *kabod* in several nonpriestly biblical texts means God’s body and, more specifically in

many passages, God's intensely bright body, which is normally surrounded by a cloud.¹⁸

But in most biblical texts the divine *kabod* refers to a divine attribute, whether a concrete one that embodies God's presence but does not exhaust it (i.e., a hypostasis) or an abstract characteristic, such as the honor due to the deity or the moral qualities the deity expresses.¹⁹ The term refers to God's publicly acknowledged honor in Psalm 19.1, where the heavens express the divine *kabod*, and in Psalms 29.1–2 and 96.7–8, where worshippers ascribe *kabod* to God.²⁰ The term is likened to abstract qualities, such as God's righteousness, salvation, loyalty, or truth in texts including Isaiah 58.8 and Psalms 57.10–12 and 85.10–14. In these cases, *kabod* characterizes or describes God, but it does not embody God. (The term can be used in this way in Ugaritic as well.²¹)

In a great many passages, it is difficult to say whether *kabod* refers to some substantial thing (that is, God's literal physical presence) or whether the term is used metaphorically of the honor due to God. For example, we are told that God's *kabod* went into exile when the Philistines captured the ark from the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4.21–2. Does this mean that God's presence resided in the ark and that God or a part of God physically moved to Philistia? Or does it merely mean that God's honor was impugned by the enemy's capture of a cultic item from Yhwh's temple? It is impossible to be sure in this as in many cases. This same ambiguity is very often present when nonpriestly texts use this term; see, for example, Isaiah 4.5; Hosea 9.11 and 10.5; Haggai 2.7–9; Psalms 24.7–9 and 26.2, to name only a few. In all these texts, one could take *kabod* to refer to God's physical manifestation, or to the splendor due to God, or even to riches stemming from God. Similarly, many texts refer to God's *kabod* as something that may be seen, but it is difficult to ascertain whether the verb "see" in these cases is literal or metaphorical; these texts may mean that one sees the *kabod* in the manner one sees a physical object, or they may mean that one perceives God's *kabod* as one perceives His faithfulness and justice (see, e.g., Isaiah 35.2, 40.5, 60.2, 62.2 and Psalms 63.3, 102.16–17 [where nations see both the *kabod* and the *shem*]).²² In some texts, the *kabod* may simply be identical with God, though there is not enough context to make a clear-cut decision. Examples include Jeremiah 2.11 and Psalm 106.20, where the people reject their *kabod* by associating themselves with false gods. Does this mean that the people abandon God Himself or merely that they lose that which gives them dignity in a more abstract sense? In Zechariah 2.9 *kabod* refers to God's Glory in Jerusalem, but one cannot be sure whether this means a sign of His protection and concern or the fiery divine body Itself. Several texts emphasize that God's *kabod* can be located in more than one place; indeed, it can be located throughout the entire world (Isaiah 6.3, Psalm 57.12; cf. Habakkuk 3.3). Is this because a particular instance of the *kabod* (perhaps we should say, any given *kabod*) is merely one of God's many bodies found in sundry locations, or is it because God's *kabod* is an abstract quality and thus not geographically bounded? Many texts associate the

kabod with the fire and lightning that accompany Yhwh's theophany; for example, throughout Psalm 29.²³ The consistent tendency of many of these ambiguous texts to associate God's *kabod* with light, fire, and brightness (e.g., Deuteronomy 5.20; Isaiah 6.3, 24.23, 60.2, 62.2; Zechariah 2.9) suggests that, even when the term is used metaphorically, a more substantial usage stands in the background.

The terms *shem* and *kabod* outside priestly and deuteronomic literature, in short, function in similar ways. Thus it is not surprising that the terms often appear together or parallel to each other (see, e.g., Isaiah 59.19; Jeremiah 14.21; Psalms 72.19, 79.9, 102.16–17, 106.2; and Nehemiah 9.5 [cf. Isaiah 30.27]). In Psalms 29.2 and 66.2, the worshippers laud the *kabod* of God's *shem*, whereas in Psalm 72.19 and Nehemiah 9.5, the *shem* of God's *kabod* receives Israel's praise. Psalm 63.3 is an especially interesting case of their appearance together: The worshipper at the sanctuary sees God's *kabod* and raises his hand to God's *shem*.

In many passages, it is hard to say whether these two closely related terms refer to parts of God's self, to concrete manifestations that embody or surround the divine presence, to abstract characteristics of God, or to epiphenomena that relate to a theophany. This difficulty is not surprising in a world where divine selfhood can be fragmented or overlapping. In such a world, there is little reason to decide whether *shem* was the very essence of God, a local manifestation of God, or a hypostasis that overlapped with God while maintaining some distinct nature. All three could be the case at once. Similarly, *kabod* might be a body of God without being *the* body of God; it might be an emanation from but not the entirety of the divine self. It is because of the scope of the fluidity traditions that we find a plethora of verses that point in all these directions.

Priestly and deuteronomic traditions, however, each use one of these terms in a strictly circumscribed way. In so doing, these traditions reject both the notion of fluid divine selfhood and the concept of multiple divine embodiment.

THE REJECTION OF FLUIDITY IN THE DEUTERONOMIC SCHOOL

As scholars have long recognized, deuteronomic texts emphasize that God dwells in heaven and nowhere else. On earth God places His *shem*, in the one place He chooses for it (viz., the Jerusalem temple). So insistently do deuteronomic traditions maintain that God is not on earth that it becomes clear that for them the *shem* is only a sign of divine presence, not a manifestation of God Himself.²⁴ This tendency emerges clearly in any number of deuteronomic passages, a few examples of which I discuss here.

1 Kings 8.14–66 contain a long speech that Solomon is said to have delivered at the dedication of his temple. (1 Kings 8.10–11 reflect a very different perspective closer to that of priestly literature, and verses 12–13 stem from a much older poetic fragment with an altogether different notion of divine presence. In the Septuagint, this poetic fragment is marked off with the concluding phrase, “Is this not written

in the Book of Song?”²⁵ The remainder of the chapter with its many references to the *shem* stem from the Deuteronomistic editors.²⁶) This deuteronomic speech refers again and again to God’s decision to place His *shem* at this temple (see verses 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 29, 33, 35, 41, 42, 43, 44, 48). According to verse 41, one travels to the temple for the sake of the *shem* and not, for example, to see God or God’s *kabod*. It is useful to contrast this view of the temple’s purpose with texts like Psalm 63.2–3 (“I seek you out. . . . In the sanctuary I gaze upon You, seeing Your might and Your *kabod*”) or Psalm 27.4 (“One thing I ask of Yhwh . . . : that I might dwell in Yhwh’s temple . . . to gaze upon His beauty”).²⁷ Solomon repeatedly states that he built the temple for the *shem* (verses 16–20, 43, 44, 48), never that he built it for God. Yet, for all the times that the word *shem* appears in this passage, it is never the subject of an active verb; it is God who listens, forgives, and does justice, not the *shem*. (In 8.29 one might be tempted to consider שׁ to be the implied subject of the infinitive לִשְׁמַע, but this is hardly necessary; in biblical Hebrew, an infinitive construct’s subject need not be the previous noun, and context makes God the more likely subject, as He is of the word לִשְׁמַע in verse 28.) The contrast with Isaiah 30.27, in which the *shem* comes from afar and displays anger, is striking. Conversely, the speech insists over and over that God dwells in heaven (verses 27, 30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49). Ronald Clements points out that “the repetition of the assertion that Yhwh dwells in heaven is so marked that we can hardly fail to suspect that such statements were composed as a refutation of those who held another view.”²⁸ Similarly, Moshe Weinfeld notes that in Solomon’s speech,

whenever the expression “Your dwelling place” (מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתֶּךָ) is employed we find that it is invariably accompanied by the word “in heaven” (vv. 30, 39, 43, 49). The deuteronomic editor is clearly disputing the older view implied by the ancient song that opens the prayer (vv.12–13) and designates the temple as God’s “exalted house and a dwelling place (or pedestal) for ever.” The word בְּשָׁמַיִם “in heaven” is consistently appended to the expression מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתֶּךָ to inform us that it is heaven which is meant and not the temple as the ancient song implies.²⁹

This speech, in short, emphasizes that God dwells in heaven, in contrast to God’s *shem*, which is in the temple. Here, the *shem* seems not to be an extension of God, because it is located precisely where God is not. Rather, the *shem* connects heaven and earth, allowing the prayer of human beings to reach the God who does not deign to become present among them. The term *shem* no longer refers to God’s essence or to some deity that overlaps with God. Instead, it refers to a *token of divine attention*.

The same point emerges from Deuteronomy 4 and 5, which retell the story of the revelation at Sinai found earlier in Exodus 19–20 and 24.³⁰ In contrast to the Exodus passages, Deuteronomy 4 emphasizes that the Israelites did not see God at Sinai, because the revelation there was exclusively auditory in nature.³¹ “Be very careful, for this is a life-and-death point: you did not see any form when God spoke to you

at Horeb from within the fire – lest you destroy yourselves by making an idol of any form of any likeness or figure,” Moses tells the people (Deuteronomy 4.15–16). Moses insists that God spoke to the people “from heaven” and that they heard God’s voice on earth coming out of the great fire (4.36). Chapters 4–5 repeatedly stress that, even at the revelation at Sinai, direct contact between God and the people occurred only at the level of the sounds or words God utters; the people never saw God. The single possible exception to this statement turns out not to be an exception at all. In Deuteronomy 5.24 the people say, “Yhwh has let us see His *kabod* and His greatness; we heard His voice from the midst of the fire; today we have seen that God can speak with a human, and the human lives.” Deuteronomy studiously avoids using the word *kabod* to refer to the divine body (indeed, this verse is the noun’s only occurrence in Deuteronomy at all). Here it is clear that *kabod* refers to God’s glory in the abstract sense, as the parallel with the word “greatness” shows. It is no coincidence that the end of the verse also uses the verb ראה in a broad, nonliteral sense (“we have *seen* that God can speak”), equivalent to “witness” or “come to understand.” This second use of the verb ראה underscores that its first use in the sentence refers not to perceiving some object with the eye but to coming to understand an abstract idea (namely, God’s glory and power). As Stephen Geller points out in his masterly treatment of these chapters, “That God shuns the earth to remain forever enthroned in His heavenly abode is the universal belief of the Deuteronomic thinkers.”³²

Philosophically minded commentators have used verses from these chapters to import an anti-anthropomorphic understanding of God into the Book of Deuteronomy, especially the phrasing of 4.15–16, which were quoted in the preceding paragraph.³³ Consequently, it is crucial to note that neither these nor any other verses in Deuteronomy claim that God is invisible or lacks a body.³⁴ Rather, these verses state that God’s body cannot be seen by humans because the latter are on earth while God’s body is in heaven. Scholars are correct to claim that Deuteronomy’s is a theology of transcendence,³⁵ but emphasizing transcendence and rejecting anthropomorphism are two different things. Deuteronomy’s emphasis on transcendence remains quite literal: God transcends this world in the spatial sense that He sits enthroned up there, while we are down here. Consequently, there is no reason to suspect that the book’s conception of God is anything but anthropomorphic.³⁶

The anthropomorphic doctrine of transcendence in Deuteronomy 4–5 coheres well with the many references to the divine *shem* elsewhere in the Book of Deuteronomy,³⁷ which express what has been called the deuteronomic Name theology. Ernest Wright explains that this theology represented

a clear rejection of the whole attempt to localize God or to consider his temple as a dwelling. The temple instead is simply a place where God’s name abides The idea of the name in connection with the temple was used to separate the building’s significance entirely from the priestly attempt to explain God’s presence in terms of

“dwelling.” The temple is important, not because it is God’s house in any literalized sense, but because it is God’s gracious condescension to human need. It symbolizes his nearness, and provides the assurance that prayers directed toward it will be heard and answered.³⁸

In this theology, the *shem* replaces the body of God in the temple. A pointed contrast between two biblical verses also testifies to this shift from body to name.³⁹ Psalm 76.2–3 states,

God makes Himself known in Judah; His *shem* is great in Israel.
He/it is in Jerusalem, His/its tabernacle; His/its habitation (וּמְעוֹתָיו) is in Zion.

Here God and His *shem* are parallel; it is immaterial whether the pronoun in the second line refers to God or the *shem*, for the *shem*’s habitation at the temple on Mount Zion entails God’s habitation there (though not necessarily God’s exclusive habitation there). In Deuteronomy 26.15, on the other hand, the ancient Israelite farmer bringing first fruits to “the place God chooses to make His name dwell” (verse 2) is directed to utter the following in his prayer:

Look down from your sacred habitation (מִמְעוֹן קֹדֶשׁךָ), from heaven (מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם), and bless your nation Israel and the land that you gave to us.

Here, God’s habitation is pointedly not in an earthly temple. As Deuteronomy 26.2 reminds us, it is the *shem* that is located there. Unlike Psalm 76, Deuteronomy 26 does not put God and the *shem* in the same place or allow them to overlap. In short, the author of Deuteronomy has put the *shem* where others thought God Himself to be.⁴⁰

Precisely the same movement is also evident in 2 Samuel 7.13, as S. Dean McBride astutely points out.⁴¹ In the original text of this passage, which is preserved in 1 Chronicles 17.12, David’s son builds a temple for God. In the deuteronomic version known from MT, he builds a house for God’s *shem*.⁴² Another example of this thematic movement from God to God’s verbal representations is found in the deuteronomists’ treatment of the ark, as Rainer Albertz has noted,

The reinterpretation of the ark in the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic theology points in the same direction. Once it had been the foundation of the cultic presence of Yhwh in the temple in Jerusalem; now it is made a container for the Decalogue (Deut. 10.11f.; cf. I Kings 8.9, 21): only in connection with his commandments is Yhwh also present for Israel in the cult.⁴³

According to the deuteronomic Name theology, then, the *shem* is not God, it is not a part of God, and it is not an extension of God.⁴⁴ The *shem* is merely a name in the sense that Western thinkers regard names: a symbol, a verbal indicator that points toward something outside itself. I should note that my citation of McBride’s insight regarding 2 Samuel 7.13 notwithstanding, my understanding of the deuteronomic Name theology differs significantly from his analysis, which remains one of the most thorough and sensitive discussions of this topic. McBride

regards the *shem* as Yhwh's cultic presence in the Jerusalem temple, an extension of Yhwh that is not quite identical to God or is not all of God.⁴⁵ To be sure, we have seen that precisely this use of the term *shem* does occur in the Hebrew Bible outside deuteronomistic literature. But the insistent tone found in so many deuteronomistic documents that distinguish between God and *shem* and between their respective locations argues against finding this use in D and Dtr. The deuteronomists used the term *shem* not to endorse or even modify its more common theological use but to deflate it.

By adopting the term *shem* to mean a sign for God, the deuteronomistic authors were able to use an old Semitic phrase, "to place one's name," which means to assert one's ownership over a place and to remind those who see the place of the owner's claim. This sense of the term appears, for example, in a letter written in prebiblical times by Abdi-Heba, the ruler of fourteenth-century Jerusalem, to his overlord, the Egyptian Pharaoh. Composing the letter in an Akkadian that was deeply influenced by the Canaanite that was his first language, Abdi-Heba's scribe writes of Pharaoh, "The king has placed his name in Jerusalem forever" (*šarri šakan šumšu ina māt urusalim ana dāriš*).⁴⁶ The phrase *šakan šumšu* (precisely cognate to the Hebrew לשכן את שמו) does not mean that Abdi-Heba thought that Pharaoh was physically present in Jerusalem; rather, Abdi-Heba acknowledges Pharaoh's claim over the city and assures Pharaoh that some sort of reminder of his authority should be present in the city. In this phrase, the word "name" does not refer to any sort of physical presence or hypostasis; rather, it means what Deuteronomy and deuteronomistic literature intend by this phrase as well: a signifier, a reminder, something very similar to a word.⁴⁷

By stipulating that God is in heaven and only in heaven, and that the *shem* does not overlap with God, the deuteronomistic tradition sets out an understanding of both divine selfhood and divine embodiment that differs from those we have seen until now. In the temple we can find only the *shem*, not God's body.

God cannot reside both in the skies and in the temple (much less in multiple temples), and thus God's heavenly body must be a unity. It is highly significant, then, that this same tradition condemns, in the strongest terms, stelae and 'asherahs, which, we saw in previous chapters, were believed to house a deity or constitute the deity's embodiment.⁴⁸ In a sharp contrast to JE, Hosea, and other Israelite texts, Deuteronomy commands the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites' stelae (*maššebot*) and wooden pillars ('*asherot/im*) in Deuteronomy 7.5 and 12.3 and enjoins them not to erect their own where they will worship in 15.21–22.⁴⁹ Other deuteronomistic literature repeatedly inveighs against the use of stelae and asherahs in the Israelite and Judean cults, associating them with Baal worship and other sins (e.g., Judges 6.25; 1 Kings 14.23; 2 Kings 3.2, 10.27, 13.6, 18.4, 21.3, 23.14; see further Jeremiah 43.13, a verse that belongs to the deuteronomistic stream within the Jeremiah traditions). For the deuteronomists, there can be no incarnations of the exclusively transcendent God. Even representations of that God are illicit, lest they come to be viewed

as embodying the divine. Indeed, for Deuteronomy, any representation of Yhwh should be regarded as a false god, a god of other nations.⁵⁰ The deuteronomists employ here what the rabbis later would call a גֵּזֵרִים or fence: in order to make clear that no physical object can embody God, they further insist that no object should even portray Him, lest the portrayal come to be regarded as an incarnation.

Just as deuteronomic tradition rejects multiplicity of divine embodiment, it also rejects fluidity of divine identity. God, the deuteronomists tell us, is an integrated self.⁵¹ The deuteronomic view of divine selfhood comes to the fore in the famous proclamation known from the *Shema* prayer, “Yhwh, our God – Yhwh is one!” or “Yhwh our God is one Yhwh” (Deuteronomy 6.4).⁵² Why does this verse use the tetragrammaton, a personal name, rather than stating what we might have expected – that there is one God? The answer lies in part in the tendency of ancient Near Eastern deities (including Yhwh, in light of the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions) to fragment into semi-independent geographic manifestations. Yhwh, we are told, is simply Yhwh. There is no Yhwh of Samaria parallel to the Yhwh of Teman in the way that Ishtar of Arbela and Ishtar of Nineveh were separate though parallel beings.⁵³ Further, even the *shem* is not multiple (contra Exodus 20.24), for the Book of Deuteronomy mandates that only one temple will exist, in the one place the one God chooses. Thus the *shem* will not be found in temples throughout the land. So strongly does Deuteronomy rule out the possibility of fragmentation, overlap, or fluidity in God that even the *shem* that reflects or symbolizes God cannot fragment.⁵⁴ Deuteronomy’s attitude toward the singularity of the name again exemplifies what the rabbis call a גֵּזֵרִים or fence: To protect the unity of God’s self, even the sign pointing to God is not allowed to multiply. In short, the famous line of the *Shema* prayer in Deuteronomy 6.4 does not so much address God’s number as it explores God’s nature: Yhwh’s self is not fluid.

The pattern we noticed in previous chapters, then, continues to be valid: God’s body parallels God’s self. In the deuteronomic tradition, God has a nonfragmentable self, and therefore God has only one body, located exclusively in heaven. Although God is able to perceive what happens throughout the world and can effect His will anywhere, He is located only in one place, and emanations of His presence do not take up residence in pillars, trees, statues, or even temples. The smallest concession is made only to the Jerusalem temple, where the *shem* is allowed to dwell. Even that concession, however, is no concession at all, for God’s name is not visible. A name is a verbal signifier, not a physical one. The *shem* resembles the text that communicates God’s will; to wit, the Book of Deuteronomy itself. Thus Deuteronomy commands Israelites not to put icons in their homes or to wear representations of their deity on their foreheads and arms (as other ancient peoples did), but rather to put words from the sacred book on their doorposts and to bind them to their foreheads and arms (Deuteronomy 6.8, 11.18). In these deuteronomic commandments, as in the deuteronomic Name theology, a verbal signifier replaces

a small-scale manifestation. God's self does not dwell among humans in any form, but God's words and God's name do.⁵⁵

THE REJECTION OF FLUIDITY IN PRIESTLY SCHOOLS

Priestly traditions, too, insist on the unity both of God and of God's body, but they do so in an entirely different way. We have seen that the term *kabod* in biblical Hebrew can refer to a body and that this term is often associated with the conflagrations, intense light, smoke, and clouds associated with God's manifestation. Priestly literature's use of the term recalls (or perhaps underlies) all these uses, for in it, *kabod* refers to God's body and hence to God's very self.⁵⁶ For P, God's body differs from the body of a human or an animal: The *kabod* consists of unspeakably bright light, and for this reason, it is surrounded by a cloud.⁵⁷ Normally, this cloud protects humans, so that they see only some of the *kabod*'s deadly brightness as it shines through the cloud. Thus, P informs us in Exodus 24.16–17, “Yhwh's *kabod* rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud (ענן) covered it for six days The appearance of Yhwh's *kabod* was like a devouring fire at the summit of the mountain visible to the children of Israel.” In Exodus 40 the *kabod* came to dwell inside the tabernacle or tent of meeting that the Israelites constructed in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. Thereafter, the cloud remained above the tent; when the *kabod* came out of the tent (for example, when the Israelite camp moved to a new location, thus necessitating the dismantling of the tabernacle where God, which is to say, the *kabod*, sat enthroned), the cloud was immediately available to surround it (see, e.g., Numbers 9.15–22).⁵⁸ Even a high priest could not view the *kabod* directly; whenever the high priest went into the tent, he had to produce a cloud by filling the room with incense before entering, lest the sight of the *kabod* kill him (see Leviticus 16.2,13; cf. the closely related tradition in Ezekiel 10.4, in which the movement of the *kabod* out of the holy of holies is preceded by the appearance of the cloud). One exception to this rule was Moses, who, we are told, entered the cloud and thus moved closer to the *kabod* itself (Exodus 24.18a). As a result, his skin became radiant (or, perhaps, disfigured),⁵⁹ and he was compelled to wear a veil from that time on (Exodus 34.29–35). The Israelites may have seen it momentarily when God alighted on Sinai and again when God accepted the first sacrifices (Exodus 24.17 and Leviticus 9.24), though they may have simply glimpsed some of the brightness through the cloud. The most spectacular exception was Ezekiel, who saw the *kabod* directly and clearly, much to his initial dismay (Ezekiel 1.1, 27–8).

Although the substance of this body differs from that of a human, its shape is basically similar. Ezekiel describes it as

a form like the semblance of a human (דמות כמרצה אדם) I saw from what resembled its loins and up something that looked like amber, with something that resembled fire

inside it all around. From what resembled its loins and down I saw what resembled fire and brightness all around. . . . This was the semblance of the form of Yhwh's *kabod*. (Ezekiel 1.26–8)

Ezekiel is careful not to equate this divine body with a typical human body (it had not “loins” but “what resembled loins”), but for all his careful verbal reservations, he makes clear that the *kabod* looks rather like a human body.⁶⁰

Unlike Ezekiel, the P documents in the Pentateuch do not describe the shape of the *kabod*, but they do speak of the form and shape (צלם, דמות) of humans in Genesis 1.26–27, 5.1, and 9.6.⁶¹ In the first of these passages we read,

God said,

“Let us make humanity (אדם)⁶² in our form (בצלמנו), after our shape (כדמותנו), so that they may rule the fish of the sea, the bird in the sky, the beast, all the earth and all the creeping things that creep on the earth.”

Then God created humanity in His form;
in the form of God He created him;
male and female He created them.⁶³

These verses assert that human beings have the same form as God and other heavenly beings. That the shape in question appears not only in God's body but also in the bodies of other heavenly beings is clear from the first-person plurals of 1.26, in which God speaks to members of the divine court: “Let *us* make the human in *our* form and shape.”⁶⁴ (Here we should recall that there is no “we” of majesty in Hebrew verbs.⁶⁵) As Randall Garr points out, angels or divine beings in the Hebrew Bible are generally conceived as being humanoid in form.⁶⁶ Consequently, the use of the first-person plural in Genesis 1.26 shows that humans, angels, and God all have the same basic shape. (Incidentally, God's decision to reach out to other divine beings in this verse was purely rhetorical, nothing more than a polite gesture; in the next verse, God creates humanity by Godself, before the other divine beings can even respond.⁶⁷)

The terms used in Genesis 1.26–27, *demut* and *šelem*, then, pertain specifically to the physical contours of God.⁶⁸ This becomes especially clear when one views the terms in their ancient Semitic context. They are used to refer to visible, concrete representations of physical objects, as verses such as 2 Kings 16.10, Ezekiel 23.14–15, 1 Samuel 6.4–5, and 2 Chronicles 4.3 make clear.⁶⁹ Mayer Gruber points out that the basic meaning of both the terms used in Genesis 1.26–27 is “statue” in old Aramaic (that is, Aramaic roughly contemporary with the P documents). This meaning becomes evident from the use of these terms in the ninth-century Aramaic-Akkadian inscription from Tell Fekherye. Both terms are used to refer to statues of the king and other human worshippers, and both are translated in the Akkadian of the inscription with the term *šalmu* (which, as we saw in Chapter 1, simply means “statue”). Thus, Gruber paraphrases כדמותנו in Genesis 1.26 plausibly as “like a statue of God.” He argues that there is no evidence suggesting we should

read these terms as somehow metaphorical and abstract. Rather, Genesis 1.26–7, 5.1, and 9.6 maintain that human beings are a sort of statue of God; it is for this reason that 9.6 insists their blood should not be shed.⁷⁰ Indeed, several scholars have pointed out that in P’s theology human beings are what Israelite religion has in place of divine statues.⁷¹

To be sure, later Jewish and Christian interpreters of Genesis 1.26–7 have attributed abstract meanings of a moral or spiritual nature to the phrase,⁷² and some of those meanings may even fit the context in Genesis 1. After all, the result of our having God’s form and shape is spelled out in 1.26 as our ability and responsibility to rule over other creatures in a manner that resembles God’s sovereignty over the universe.⁷³ Consequently, those interpretations that emphasize the regal dignity and authority that humanity can attain are contextually defensible.⁷⁴ But any such reading of the terms *demut* and *selem* in our priestly passages in Genesis supplements the terms’ basic, physical meaning without superseding it. One might, of course, argue that the Creator could endow a being with divine attributes of an abstract, moral or spiritual nature, without also endowing the creature with a divine form in a physical sense. In theory, such a conception of creation is possible, but this conception is simply not conveyed in the Hebrew phrase *בצלמנו כדמותנו* as used by P. This becomes clear from Genesis 5.3: “Adam fathered a son in his form, after his shape and named him ‘Seth.’” There the phrase must retain its fundamental physical meaning; after all, when a human fathers a child, he is first of all endowing the child with his basic shape. Humans have no ability to bestow abstract attributes or ethical qualities at birth to their offspring. At least in Genesis 5.3, then, P unambiguously uses the terms *צלם* and *דמות* in the sense they typically have in Hebrew – that is, P uses these terms to refer to physical shape and form. It strains credulity to argue that P uses these terms differently in 5.1, 9.6, and 1.26–7.⁷⁵

Once P attributes to God the same basic shape as a human (roughly, a head, two arms, two legs), the question arises: Are there any other appendages – that is, does God have a gender? To this, the P writer in Genesis 1.27 quickly answers, “And God created the human in His image: in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” God has no one gender. God is either without gender, or perhaps we might say (if we take the language of the verse quite literally) that God is both male and female.⁷⁶ The text’s need to address the question of humanity’s gender immediately after it informs us that humanity has the same form and shape as God helps confirm that these terms refer to a bodily image.⁷⁷

It is worth pausing to reflect on two surprising aspects of the body of God as imagined by priestly authors. First, priestly texts make clear that the *kabod* has a shape, but they do not make clear the precise nature of its substance. It is clear that for P the *kabod* gives off, or consists of, extraordinary brightness, the sight of which usually caused death; but could one, at least in theory, touch it (even if doing so was fatal), or would one’s hand go right through it? It is possible that for the priestly authors God’s body consists of light but not of flesh, something like

an intense fire, but not of some solid object that is burning. To picture this, one should imagine not a piece of wood that is on fire, but just a self-sustaining fire by itself. (If E has a similar conception of [at least one of] God's bodies, incidentally, it suddenly becomes clear why the bush in Exodus 3.2 burns but is not consumed. A blazing body of God has located itself inside the bush, but that divine blaze is self-sustaining. The bush is not providing fuel for the fire-like substance that is God's presence; it is merely sharing space with that presence, so that to Moses' eye the bush appears to be on fire even as it does not burn.) If I may be permitted the anachronism of applying Newtonian terms to these ancient texts, the *kabod* is made of energy but not matter. It is for this reason that Yehezkel Kaufmann, in his still unsurpassed summary of Israelite notions of God's nature, could say the following:

Biblical literature . . . attributes a form to God without feeling any discomfort. There is no abstract notion of God in the Bible, and no urge towards formulating such an abstraction. . . . [Yet] Israelite religion overcame anthropomorphism in one fundamental and decisive respect: It imagined God as having no connection to the matter of the world. God has no material aspect whatsoever, and He is beyond nature and its matter. God is "spirit and not flesh," He is not a "body."⁷⁸

One might at first be surprised by Kaufmann's insistence that biblical conceptions of God are thoroughly and without exception anthropomorphic,⁷⁹ because this insistence comes alongside his denial that the biblical God has a body. Similarly bemusing is Kaufmann's claim that the biblical God has a form but no body. Nonetheless, if by "body" we mean something material as opposed to some sort of light or energy, then his characterization is valid for priestly texts. (On the other hand, it is not valid for all biblical texts; as we saw in the previous chapter, many other passages in Hebrew scripture do imagine a God with a fairly typical human body. The one flaw in Kaufmann's discussion of anthropomorphism in the Bible is his tendency to overlook differences pertaining to this issue among various strata of biblical literature.⁸⁰) Kaufmann employs a definition of "body" according to which a body is made of a solid material. If we use instead the definition of "body" I gave in the Introduction – "something located in a particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance" – we might phrase Kaufmann's point differently: The God of priestly texts has a body with the same basic shape as the human body, but God's body differs from human bodies in that it is an immaterial one. Yair Lorberbaum aptly describes Kaufmann's understanding as "non-material anthropomorphism."⁸¹ Kaufmann's attempts to portray priestly literature (or the Bible in general) as being opposed to a concrete conception of God have in mind the nonmaterial aspect of its theology, and he does not deny the Bible's unabashed and consistent anthropomorphism.

The second aspect of the divine body as imagined by P follows from the first. Although the *kabod* has a particular shape, it is not clear that it has a permanent size. It is big enough to cover the whole top of Mount Sinai and to be visible to

the people some distance away at the foot of the mountain in Exodus 24.16–17 (a P passage), yet is small enough to fit into the holy of holies in the tabernacle, a space that measures ten cubits by ten cubits (roughly five meters by five meters). Once a year, the high priest entered the holy of holies (Leviticus 16.2), from which we may infer that the *kabod* does not take up the entirety of these twenty-five square meters. Indeed, we shall see shortly that P imagines the *kabod* sitting atop the Ark, which was two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits deep (approximately one and a quarter meters by three-quarters of a meter). The possibility that the *kabod*'s size varies is not surprising in light of its fiery rather than its fleshly substance. God's body consists of something like a flame that could grow to enormous proportions or become more concentrated at God's will. The evidence, to be sure, is not clear cut; it is also at least possible that the *kabod* itself does not vary in size (in which case it must have been relatively small to fit in the holy of holies), whereas the cloud that surrounds it expands and contracts. What remains noteworthy in any event is the fact that God's body, for P, is not necessarily huge. This conception stands in contrast to some other ancient traditions found in the Bible and early Jewish literature, in which God's body is often portrayed as enormous.⁸²

In spite of the foregoing discussion, one might raise another sort of objection to my assertion that priestly literature regards the *kabod* as the actual body of God: "Yes, the *kabod* in priestly literature has a shape, but the *kabod* may not be God's body. Rather, it may be a divine attribute or an accompaniment to divine revelation, as it is in other biblical texts, and as the *melammu* or *namrurrū* often are in Akkadian literature."⁸³ Claims resembling this objection appear already among Jewish thinkers from late antiquity and the Middle Ages who insist on a distinction between God and the *kabod*.⁸⁴ The latter, according to some medieval philosophers, is an object that God created in time, similar to the Torah or the earth or the stars or majestic mountains, all of which, in their own ways, cause the humans who perceive them to honor God. Maimonides, for example, speaks of the *kabod* in texts like Exodus 24.16 and 40.34 (both of them priestly texts according to modern biblical scholars) as "the created light that God causes to descend in a particular place in order to confer honor upon it in a miraculous way."⁸⁵ An analogous line of reasoning occurs among some of the more intensely neo-Platonic Jewish mystics; for example, those ancient Jewish mystics who regard the divine body as belonging to a demiurge [יצר בראשית] rather than being identical with the Godhead Itself [אידון הכל]. Similarly, some of the medieval kabbalists distinguish ontologically between the אין סוף and the created attributes of God found in the *sephirot*.⁸⁶

This objection – that the *kabod* may not be God's body – does not stand up under scrutiny, because both the priestly authors and the prophet Ezekiel assert the identity of the *kabod* and God quite explicitly. In [chapter 1](#) of his book, Ezekiel describes several heavenly creatures who were located (he tells us) underneath the *kabod* during the prophetic experience he underwent on the banks of the Chebar Canal in Mesopotamia. Later in his book, Ezekiel refers to one of these heavenly

creatures as “the creature I saw under the God of Israel on the Chebar Canal” (10.20).⁸⁷ This phrasing shows that “God” and “Yhwh’s *kabod*” are interchangeable terms for Ezekiel.⁸⁸ Similarly, the identity between the *kabod* and God becomes clear in priestly texts that narrate the arrival of the *kabod* on earth in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. According to this narrative, which has been analyzed with particular acuity by Baruch Schwartz,⁸⁹ the *kabod* arrived at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19.1–2, 24.15b), whereupon

The cloud covered the mountain, and then Yhwh’s *kabod* dwelt on the mountain, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day, He/It called to Moses from within the cloud.

(Exodus 24.15–16)

The phrasing is telling. It entails the identity of *kabod* and Yhwh, for these verses make clear that the *kabod* was located within the cloud, and it was from within the cloud that God spoke to Moses. After God called to him, P informs us, “Moses entered the cloud, and Yhwh spoke with him as follows . . .” (Exodus 24.18a, 25.1).⁹⁰ (In both 24.16 and 25.1, God speaks to Moses, but in the latter the words “from within the cloud” do not appear, because by that time Moses was together with God/the *kabod* inside the cloud.) While inside the cloud, Moses received instructions to build the tabernacle (Exodus 25.2–31.18). He went back down and imparted these instructions; during the next year, the people constructed the tabernacle, while, so far as one can tell, the *kabod* remained atop the mountain (Exodus 35.1–40.33). Once the tabernacle was complete, the *kabod* descended further:

Moses completed the work.
 And then the cloud covered the tent of meeting.
 Yhwh’s *kabod* had filled the tabernacle!
 Moses could not enter the tent of meeting,
 For the cloud rested on it.
 Yhwh’s *kabod* had filled the tabernacle!

(And whenever the cloud lifted up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on all their travels, but if the cloud did not lift up, they would not travel until it did so. For the cloud of Yhwh was visible over the tabernacle to all the house of Israel by day, as was the fire by night, during all their journeys.) And Yhwh called out to Moses from the tent of meeting, and He spoke as follows . . .

(Exodus 40.33b–38, Leviticus 1.1)

In the last verses of Exodus, the *kabod* entered the tent; and in the immediately following verse (that is, the first verse of Leviticus, which continues the narrative without interruption), Yhwh called to Moses from within the tent.⁹¹ Here again, the text makes the identity of the *kabod* and God clear, as it does in the verses that narrate how God accepted the first sacrifices one week later: “Yhwh’s *kabod*

manifested itself to the whole people, and a fire from where Yhwh was went out and consumed what was on the altar . . . and the whole people saw, and they shouted and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9.23–4). For the *kabod* to manifest itself entails a fire coming forth from the location in which Yhwh rested, in the holy of holies beyond the altar.

Throughout the rest of the Pentateuchal narrative, the *kabod* remained in the tabernacle, coming out only on rare occasions when a demonstration of divine might in support of Moses and Aaron was necessary (Numbers 16.19, 17.7, 20.6). The *kabod* seems to have dwelt inside the holy of holies, sitting on the cherubim and using the ark as a footstool.⁹² A similar description occurs in a priestly influenced description of the dedication of Solomon’s temple in 1 Kings 8.10–11, indicating that the *kabod* ultimately dwelled in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple.

Having achieved immanence, the transcendent God remained in the holy of holies or right above it. There is no indication that the *kabod* merely visited the sanctuary for brief periods. No priestly narratives in the Pentateuch ever describe its exit and return.⁹³ Nonetheless, Ezekiel makes clear that the *kabod* would not necessarily dwell in the temple forever. By the time depicted in Ezekiel 8–10, God has become disgusted with the practices of the people and the defilement of the temple. Consequently, God decided, after spending some 910 years on the earth,⁹⁴ to leave solid ground:

The *kabod* of the God of Israel lifted itself up from the cherub on which it was located [and went] to the threshold of the temple . . . I saw, and – look! – on the firmament over the heads of the cherubs, something like sapphire stone appeared; it resembled the form of a chair . . . And the cloud filled the inner courtyard [outside the holy of holies], and Yhwh’s *kabod* got up from the cherub on the threshold of the temple, and the cloud filled the temple, and the courtyard was filled with the brightness of Yhwh’s *kabod* . . . And Yhwh’s *kabod* left the threshold of the temple and stood on the cherubim [who had just arrived from outside the temple]. And the cherubim lifted their wings and raised themselves up from the earth in my sight . . . and the *kabod* of the God of Israel was on them.

(Ezekiel 9.3, 10.1–26)

Having entered, the *kabod* could exit, and of course it could eventually come back, as Ezekiel predicts it will do in 43.1–5.⁹⁵

This whole set of intimately connected narratives found in P and Ezekiel, then, concerns the decision by the God who lives in heaven to dwell instead on earth,⁹⁶ God’s decision to abandon an earthly abode because of the nation’s sin, and God’s decision some day to return. Indeed, *a central theme of priestly tradition – perhaps, the central theme of priestly tradition – is the desire of the transcendent God to become immanent on the earth this God had created.*⁹⁷

This whole complex of comings and goings bears comparison to the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremonies. The events narrated in the second half of the Book of

Exodus might be described functionally as a sort of *mīs pî*, a ceremonial process that allowed for divine immanence. Following very specific instructions (laid out in painstaking detail in Exodus 25–31), the people built a receptacle for Yhwh’s presence. Like the Mesopotamian *šalmu*, the priestly tabernacle might be described as born in heaven and made on earth, because the human artisans who fashion it make sure it conforms to a heavenly prototype; they are able to build it only because of the divine spirit that rests on them as they work (Exodus 31.1–11, 35.30–36.2). As is the case with a deity who enters a *šalmu* after it is activated by the *mīs pî*, the divine presence need not reside in the tabernacle forever but can abandon it.⁹⁸

But a crucial difference must be noted: In Mesopotamia, at any moment many objects in many places could host the presence of a particular deity, but in priestly literature the *kabod* resides in one place only. No priestly text intimates that there can be more than one tabernacle or more than one *kabod*.⁹⁹ The reason that the tabernacle must be so carefully constructed and that the cloud must surround the *kabod* is that the tabernacle does not merely house divine presence; it houses *the* divine presence. No other object in priestly literature contains a small-scale manifestation of God; for the priests, there is but a single place where God resides. Although God’s ability to perceive and to act is unlimited by geography, P’s God has only one body.¹⁰⁰ P differs from JE, then, in asserting that God is present not in multiple stelae but in a single sanctuary. Thus it is no coincidence that priestly literature specifically outlaws sacred stelae and pillars in Leviticus 26.1–2: “Do not make for yourselves false-gods; do not erect for yourselves a pillar or stele (*maššebah*) . . . for I am Yhwh your God. Observe my Sabbaths and respect my sanctuary.” One cannot at once erect stelae and respect the sanctuary, for attending to the incarnations implied by the former would detract from the nondivisible body housed in the latter.¹⁰¹ (P does let what we might call an echo of the *’asherah* remain in the tabernacle, though outside the holy of holies where God resides: The main room of the tabernacle and later of the Jerusalem temple contains a metal *menorah* or lamp stand, whose shape recalls a bush or tree with six branches on each side.¹⁰²)

The priestly picture further differs from the Mesopotamian and JE conceptions in another critical respect. For Mesopotamian texts and JE, g/God can be at once in heaven and on earth. The existence of Ishtar in Arbella does not detract from Ishtar’s astral body on high. For P, however, God is in only one place. The priestly narrative in the Pentateuch tells us that God descended from heaven to Mount Sinai (Exodus 24.15b–16), but not that God returned to heaven. Apparently, the *kabod* remained on Sinai while the Israelites erected the tabernacle. Later It went into the tabernacle, initially filling its entirety (Exodus 40.34–5) and still later settling in the holy of holies at the western edge of the structure, whence God spoke to Moses (Leviticus 1.1).¹⁰³ Never thereafter does the priestly narrative in the Pentateuch tell us that God ascended to God’s earlier abode.

On the contrary, whenever the *kabod*, surrounded by the cloud, appears to the nation at a time of emergency, It always appears from the tabernacle *and never from heaven* (Numbers 14.10; 16.5–7, 18–19, 35; 20.6; in none of these cases are we told that the *kabod* descended). Similarly, when P tells us that God spoke to Moses from within the holy of holies, P refrains from narrating God’s arrival in the tabernacle, for the *kabod* is located there permanently. It is Moses who moves, not God: “When Moses went to the tent of meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice communicating with him from on top of the cover above the ark of the pact, from between the two cherubim” (Numbers 7.89; so also Exodus 25.22). The contrast with E’s description of the communication that takes place at the tent is telling. In E, both the humans and God come to the Tent, the humans from the camp and God from heaven: “Yhwh called suddenly to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, ‘Come out, the three of you, to the tent of meeting!’ The three of them went out, and then Yhwh descended in the pillar of the cloud and stood at the entrance to the Tent. God called, ‘Aaron and Miriam!,’ and they both approached” (Numbers 12.4–5). Only in Ezekiel 8–10 does a priestly writer tell us that God left God’s earthly abode – centuries after God’s entrance. In spite of the many priestly texts that address the precise whereabouts of the *kabod* and in stark contrast to other ancient texts, P never locates divinity in heaven once it has come down to earth. The conclusion is clear: For P, God has only one body, and it is located either in heaven or on earth, but not in both places.

Similarly, for P, God has only one self: No priestly texts point toward the sort of fragmentation, overlap, or emanation we find in various Israelite, Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts discussed earlier. The *mal’akh Yhwh* so prominent in JE traditions is never once mentioned in P. The nondeuteronomistic *shem*, which embodies God without exhausting all God’s presence, does not occur in P. The basic pattern we have observed throughout this book holds: God’s body reflects God’s self, in this case (as in Deuteronomy) because both are indivisible.

The contrast between P’s conception of God’s self and JE’s comes across especially clearly when we compare two verses that narrate the deliverance of the Israelites’ firstborn from the plague that strikes the Egyptians. In J, Moses tells the Israelites on the eve of the Exodus,

When Yhwh goes out to strike the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and Yhwh will guard the entrance without allowing the Destroyer (הַמַּשְׁחִית) to enter your houses to smite you.

(Exodus 12.23 [J])

In P, however, God says to the Israelites.

The blood will be your sign on the houses, showing that you are there. I shall see the blood, and I shall guard you. Among you there will be no plague as destruction (לַמַּשְׁחִית) when I strike the land of Egypt.

(Exodus 12.13 [P])

William Propp and Randall Garr note the striking contrast between these verses. Quoting Propp's work, Garr explains that, in J, the Destroyer (הַמְשַׁחֵת)

is a "personalized, quasi-independent aspect of Yhwh"¹⁰⁴ that functions as a destructive agent of God's will (see also 2 Sam 24:16a17). Yet according to P, the Destroyer does not exist [In the P verse] מְשַׁחֵת is not a concrete entity; it is not an angel or quasi-independent vehicle of God's will; and it does not act at God's behest. In v. 13, מְשַׁחֵת is an abstraction. It does not even refer directly to God (cf. Gen 6:13b [P]). P's מְשַׁחֵת is an attribute of "plague." In the hands of P, then, the divine Destroyer is itself destroyed. No longer an aspect of God, it is depersonalized and demythologized out of existence.¹⁰⁵

In the J verse, both God and the Destroyer could be the implied subjects of the infinitive לַגִּיף ("to smite"), because the latter is simply an aspect of the former. Yhwh smites in His manifestation as Destroyer. J's Destroyer, then, closely resembles the divine being with whom Jacob wrestled in Genesis 32 and who embodied God's *shem* in Exodus 23: It was more limited than God (and, like the being with whom Jacob wrestled, it acted specifically at night), but it was in all likelihood not an independent being sent on a mission. It shared in Yhwh's incomparable divinity without coming close to exhausting it.¹⁰⁶ P, on the other hand, has a different conception. In Exodus 12.13, as in Ezekiel 5.16, 9.6, 21.36, and 25.15, לַמְשַׁחֵת refers to an abstract noun, "destruction."¹⁰⁷ It is God who sees, smites, and guards; the quasi-independent being is pointedly absent from the priestly passage, for God's self is entirely integrated and allows no fragmentation.¹⁰⁸

P's perception of divinity matches P's manner of thinking generally. The priestly God is not the fluid and shifting being found in J and E, present in many places, wrestling with a human here and standing outside a tent there, lurking at times in one humanoid body and at other times in several while also abiding in wood or stone. Rather, P's God is strictly delimited, and human attempts at coming too close (as we see in our reading of the Nadab and Abihu story in [Chapter 5](#)) can be deadly. Priestly theology, then, resembles priestly cosmogony, priestly anthropology, and priestly law: In all these, boundaries, their formation, and their maintenance are absolutely crucial. P's emphasis on strict and clear distinctions is evident from the opening lines of the P document in Genesis 1, where creation consists first and foremost of dividing and setting limits (between light and dark, between water and land, between waters above and waters below), and this tendency recurs throughout the P documents. Israel is to imitate God by creating distinctions as well: between sacred times and normal times, between acceptable foods and unacceptable ones, between those who may stand closer to the *kabod* in the tabernacle and those who, in that particular location, would be זָר (strange or, more accurately, out of place). P's concern with the indivisibility of God's body recalls P's laws of sacrifice: A human who is not whole – that is, who has lost a limb – may not officiate as a priest (Leviticus 21.17–21); an animal who has lost a limb may not function as an offering (Leviticus 1.3,10; 3.1,6, etc.). A similar concern lies behind the terminology P chooses when discussing the fate of an Israelite who fails to make

crucial distinctions, such as using priestly anointing oil on a nonpriest, or eating a sacrificial meal while ritually impure, or failing to remove blood from meat before eating it: The offending Israelite in these cases is “cut off” (נכרת; see Exodus 30.33, Leviticus 7.20, 17.14, etc.).¹⁰⁹ The idiom reflects P’s concern with integrity, because the ultimate punishment in P’s worldview is to cease to be part of a whole.

CONCLUSION

A few words are in order concerning the reasoning that led the deuteronomists and priests to condemn not only manifestations of Yhwh but all physical portrayals of God as well.¹¹⁰ I suspect that these authors may have feared some possible consequences of allowing physical representations. A person might misperceive physical representations of God as actual manifestations; multiple manifestations would entail multiple bodies; and hence they might imply a fragmentation of divine selfhood as well. Thinkers who emphasize integrated selfhood, then, may sense the need to shy away from physical representations of any kind. Doing so provided a buffer from even the possibility of multiplicity of embodiment and fluidity of self. This tendency to remain as far as possible from the idea of divine fluidity may explain the iconoclasm or iconophobia of biblical religion, which goes beyond the aniconism found to one degree or another among many Northwest Semitic peoples.¹¹¹

The threat that divine embodiment poses is well-attested in the writings of a slightly later Jewish group. The Israelite/Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt (which flourished in the sixth century B.C.E.) worshipped not only Yhwh but a god called Eshem-Bethel and a goddesses variously called Anat-Bethel and Anat-Yahu.¹¹² The combination of the terms is striking. “Eshem” is an old Aramaic form of the word *shem*. It recalls the goddesses Astarte, Name of Baal (*shem-Baal*) in Ugarit and Tannit, Presence of Baal (*penei-Baal*) in Phoenicia, whom we discussed in [Chapter 1](#). The term “Bethel,” as we saw in [Chapter 2](#), is a name for the small-scale manifestation or *mal’akh* present in a stele or the deified betyl. This confluence of terms suggests that the god Eshem-Bethel was a hypostasis, an extension, or (to use the Sanskrit term) an avatar of Yhwh – indeed, an avatar who came to be seen as an independent deity.¹¹³ Alternatively (or even at the same time), the Jews of Elephantine may have believed that Eshem-Bethel overlapped with Yhwh, just as Tannit was in part an aspect of Baal in some Phoenician texts. Similarly, Anat-Yahu and Anat-Bethel may have been spouses of Yhwh/Bethel, related to Yhwh just as Tannit was related to Baal: not wholly separate, not wholly identical.¹¹⁴ (In light of the connection between the fluidity model and northern Israel, it is not surprising that the Elephantine community was likely of northern origin.¹¹⁵)

The Jews of Elephantine were likely the deuteronomists’ worst nightmare. It was out of fear of developments of the type that occurred in Elephantine that

the deuteronomists and priests had outlawed the stelae and betyls that Yhwhistic Israelites had long utilized in their worship. But the theological intuition found in JE and elsewhere did not simply disappear, in spite of the dominant role that deuteronomic and priestly literature play in the biblical canon. Not only in Elephantine but in many postbiblical traditions they would return. Before attending to the reappearance of the fluidity tradition in later Judaism and its implications for Jewish theology, however, it is worth our while to examine the implications that both ancient models of divine embodiment carry for the biblical understanding of sacred space.



God's Bodies and Sacred Space (1): Tent, Ark, and Temple

IN THE INTRODUCTION, I DEFINED A BODY AS SOMETHING LOCATED IN A particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance. It follows that if God has a body, then at any moment some place enjoys a privilege that other places lack. Consequently, the question of divine embodiment carries weighty implications for the issue of sacred space.¹ Different attitudes toward sacred space, furthermore, should emerge in the fluidity and nonfluidity traditions. We see in this chapter and the next that texts associated with the fluidity traditions regard many spots as sacred and hence undermine a religious ideology that exalts a single sacred center. The antifluidity traditions known from priestly and deuteronomic* literature, in contrast, insist on the existence of a unique sacred center, but surprisingly, each of them also undercuts an ideology of the sacred center as well. These attitudes toward sacred space become evident in several ways. In this chapter, I examine attitudes in Pentateuchal sources toward the tent of meeting (or tabernacle), the temple, and the ark to see how their different understandings of sacred space reflect their different perceptions of divine embodiment. In Chapter 5, I examine texts that focus on the theme of place in narratives of origin.

THE TENT OF MEETING IN P AND IN E

Both priestly and nonpriestly texts in the Pentateuch describe a tent in which the divine manifests itself. These priestly and nonpriestly tents differ, however, so that the Torah presents conflicting depictions of the divine presence during the wilderness period. According to the priestly authors, the *kabod* entered and subsequently resided in what these texts variously call the “tabernacle” (Hebrew, *משכן*, which simply means “dwelling”), the “tent of meeting” (*אהל מועד*), and “tent

* I use the term *deuteronomic* to refer to the schools that produced the Book of Deuteronomy and the historical books that follow Deuteronomy (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). I use the term *Deuteronomistic* to refer more narrowly to the editors responsible for those historical books. On this use, see n. 1 in [Chapter 3](#). In what follows, D refers to the authors responsible for most of the Book of Deuteronomy (but not for all of the material in its last few chapters, which contain passages from J, E, and P as well as D), whereas Dtr refers to the Deuteronomistic editors responsible for Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

of the pact” (אהל העדה). In Numbers 9.15–23 the priestly authors stress that the cloud and fire indicating the immediate presence of God were always located in or above this tabernacle. Thus the tabernacle as described in P was the site of an unceasing and ever-accessible theophany.² Behind the curtains of the holy of holies stood the ark and its cover, which served as God’s footstool and throne respectively.³ Within the tabernacle, or perhaps above it, was the *kabod* itself, which was usually hidden from sight by the ענן or cloud. It was at (or from) the tabernacle that God’s presence would become manifest at times of crisis (see Numbers 14.20, 16.19, 17.7, and 20.6).⁴

Priestly literature repeatedly highlights the tabernacle’s centrality. P’s elaborate map in Numbers 2 proclaims this centrality on a literal level. According to this map, the tabernacle was located in the midpoint of the Israelite camp, surrounded by concentric circles of priests, Levites, and the tribes of Israel. More significantly, the tabernacle plays a principal role in the cosmos. As we see in the next chapter, the priestly authors regard the tabernacle as the capstone of creation, and the world as incomplete until the tabernacle was erected. Two inaugural ceremonies for the tabernacle also attest to its pivotal position in priestly literature. The first was an eight-day dedication service, described in Exodus 40–Leviticus 10, during which the tabernacle was completed, the divine presence entered it, its altar was purified, and its priesthood was installed. The second ceremony was a highly orchestrated twelve-day service, described in Numbers 7, during which each of the twelve tribes brought identical gifts to the tabernacle.⁵ According to P, the tabernacle, rather than Mount Sinai, was also the place from which God’s law code was revealed starting in Leviticus 1.1 (the lawgiving at Sinai depicted in Exodus occurs only in J and E texts, never in P texts).⁶ Further, it served as the single legitimate place of regular worship for Israelites in the desert; not only did God approach Israel there, but Israel approached God there as well. Nowhere else are Israelites allowed to offer sacrifices; indeed, nowhere else are they allowed to eat domesticated land animals.⁷ In short, the priestly tabernacle is a sacred center, the capstone of the universe; and God is constantly and reliably manifest there.⁸

The conception of divine presence in the E collection of documents is wholly different.⁹ E introduces this tent in Exodus 33.7–11:

Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, far from the camp. He would call it “the tent of meeting.” Whoever sought Yhwh would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, the whole nation would rise, each person standing at the entrance to his tent, and they would look toward Moses until he arrived at the tent. Whenever Moses arrived at the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the entrance to the tent, and the whole nation would arise and bow down, each person at the entrance to his tent. God would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend; then he would go back to the camp. His servant, the lad Joshua, the son of Nun, never left the inside of the tent.

The differences between E's conception of the tent and P's are readily evident. E's "tent of meeting" (אהל מועד; E texts never call it the "tabernacle" or "tent of the pact") was located outside the Israelites' camp, indeed at some distance from it. This brief passage states several times that it was not within the camp and that one had to exit the camp to get to it, as if to emphasize its divergence from the other conception of the tent. God did not dwell in E's tent but popped in on appropriate occasions to reveal Himself to Moses or to other Israelites. When God directs Moses to gather seventy of the Israelite elders around the tent, God says, "I will come down and speak with you there" (Numbers 11.17; so too in 11.25; note that in verse 26 it is clear that the tent is located outside the camp). Had P written this story, Moses would not have taken the elders out of the camp to the tent but rather would have gone farther into the camp's center. In P, God would have emerged from the tent instead of descending toward it from heaven. The occasional nature of God's presence in E's tent is especially clear in Numbers 12.4–10, which narrate the arrival and departure of the pillar of cloud:

Suddenly, God said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "All three of you – go out to the tent!" The three of them went. Then God came down as a pillar of fire, stood at the entrance to the tent, and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" And the two of them went out. . . . [God rebukes Aaron and Miriam in the next several verses.] And God was angry with them, and He left. The cloud having left, Miriam was suddenly leprous as snow! Aaron turned to Miriam, and – look! – she was afflicted with leprosy.

Rather than being surrounded by Israel, this tent was isolated. Only one person, Joshua, resided there as a caretaker – and he did so only when the tent was standing at all. (It is evident from the frequentative verbs in Exodus 33.7, וַיִּקַּח . . . וַיִּנָּסֶה, that the tent did not always stand, because Moses repeatedly left the camp to pitch the tent.) Thus E does not portray God as permanently immanent, and even when the presence manifested itself, it did so outside the Israelite camp. (On a single occasion, the divine spirit – and even then not the pillar of cloud denoting God's physical presence – worked within the camp itself. This event became a cause of scandal; see Numbers 11.26–9.¹⁰) E's tent contains no ark and no divine throne.¹¹

The contrast between the Elohist and priestly views of the tent becomes especially clear in their use of the word ענן, which refers to the cloud that indicates the presence of God. In E texts (Exodus 33.9; Numbers 11.25, 12.5), the cloud is the subject of the verb ירד (descend) – that is, it comes and goes. Priestly texts, in contrast, emphasize that the cloud and the fire were always present at the tent, rising up only when Yhwh wished to indicate that the Israelites should break their camp and move to a new location (Exodus 40.36–8 and Numbers 9.15–23). In Numbers 9.16 P stresses that from the time the cloud first covered the tent, the cloud never moved from there. The insistent tone of Numbers 9.15–23 on this point may be a priestly response to the alternate viewpoint found in E. But even

if P and E are unaware of each other, the contrast between the two pictures of the tent of meeting remains striking.¹²

THE TENT: LOCATIVE AND UTOPIAN VISIONS

The P and E tents exemplify two different religious ideologies described by the historian of religion, J. Z. Smith, in his revision of Mircea Eliade's grand theory of archaic and postarchaic religions.¹³ A *locative* or *centripetal*¹⁴ view of the universe underscores and celebrates that which is primeval and central. In this worldview, all times and places have value or even reality only insofar as they relate to, borrow from, duplicate, imitate, or acknowledge the moment of creation or the axis that connects heaven and earth, which may be a temple or a sacred mountain and is likely to be both. Such a mentality expresses an ideology of immanence, for it is based on the conviction that the divine irrupts into space and time – more precisely, into specific places and at specific times. Classic examples of a locative map of the universe come from ancient Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Egypt.¹⁵ This religious sensibility was prevalent in Israel as well, most prominently in the ideology of divine presence in the Jerusalem temple (one thinks especially of texts like Psalm 48 and Isaiah 6). An alternate view of the universe emphasizes not the center but the periphery, not immanence but transcendence (for no place fully comprehends the divine); it recognizes the reality, the unavoidability, and even the value of reversal, liminality, and chaos. Smith terms this a *utopian* viewpoint in the basic sense of the word: lacking place. We may also term it *centrifugal*: This viewpoint flees from the center or, more precisely, refuses to acknowledge that there is any one center.

The tents described by P and E conform to Smith's categories in a strikingly clear fashion. The priestly tabernacle presents a classic example of Smith's locative model: God is immanent at a sacred center, whose construction effected the recurrence – in fact, we see in the next chapter, the climax – of what Eliade called *illo tempore* (“that time”), the moment in which the world came into being. E's tent, in contrast, represents a utopian worldview. It locates religious value in the periphery rather than the center and endorses a constrained model of immanence. Utopian cultures, Smith explains, “express a more ‘open’ view . . . in which beings are called upon to challenge their limits, break them, or create new possibilities.”¹⁶ This description is especially relevant to the E passage in Numbers 11.26–9. There we are told that two of the Israelite elders who were supposed to have gone out to the tent of meeting in fact remained in the camp. Yet they too broke into prophecy, even though they were not located near the pillar of cloud. A lad ran to inform Moses of this surprising event, prompting Joshua to cry, “My lord Moses! Shut them up!” Moses, however, responded, “Are you jealous on my behalf? I wish that all Yhwh's nation were prophets, that Yhwh would place His spirit on them!” In these verses, E articulates an ideal view of prophecy according to which all Israelites, regardless

of geographic or social location, would break into prophetic ecstasy – a possibility that threatens the established structures of power and those who expect to inherit them (namely, Joshua).

The differing conceptions of the tent where God becomes manifest are precisely what we would expect of P and E in light of their differing perceptions of divine embodiment. We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that E belongs to a set of ancient Israelite texts that regard God's self as fluid and God's bodies as numerous. In the worldview expressed by those texts, many locations can become a locus of holiness. The centrifugal vision of the tent follows from E's embrace of multiple divine embodiment: For E, the periphery can become a center at any time. In contrast, the emphasis on a single center we find in the priestly depiction of the tent fits P's antifluidity stance. If there is only one divine body, then there can be only one truly sacred space at any given moment in time. For P, the distinction between center and periphery is absolutely crucial, for the sort of blurred line we find in E could be taken to imply that God's one body can be divided or that God's body is not one but many.

The contrast between the tent of meeting in P and in E is strikingly clear and has been noticed by many scholars.¹⁷ By comparing a single symbol, the tent of meeting, in a single corpus, the Pentateuch, one notices a dichotomy between two religious worldviews associated with that symbol. One of these worldviews in the Pentateuch is locative, and the other utopian. A similar polarity can be found in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and again the priestly tabernacle represents one pole. Surprisingly, however, in this polarity the tabernacle's position is reversed: P's tent no longer represents the locative model. In short, a single sign refers to opposing referents in two different but overlapping contexts, the Torah and the Tanakh. This situation suggests that the priestly tabernacle at once endorses the notion of a sacred center and calls that notion into question. I defer consideration of the implications of the tabernacle's duality until the next chapter. For now, I simply wish to describe this second polarity.

The Zion-Sabaoth Theology

On one side of the second polarity stands what the great Scandinavian biblicist Tryggve Mettinger calls the "Zion-Sabaoth theology." A banner example of Smith's locative worldview, this theology conceives of God as permanently present in the Jerusalem temple on Mount Zion, which contained the throneseat of Yhwh.¹⁸ (Here we should recall that, in biblical usage, the word "Zion" refers to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and, by extension, to the city of Jerusalem as a whole. It does not refer to what is known today as Mount Zion, which is the hill located immediately west and slightly south of the Temple Mount or just south of contemporary Jerusalem's Armenian quarter, nor does the term "Zion" in biblical Hebrew refer to the land of Israel in its entirety.) Texts that display the Zion-Sabaoth theology often refer

to God as *ה' צבאות יושב הכרובים* (“Yhwh of hosts [=Sabaoth, *ṣeba’ot*], who sits on the cherubim”). Sometimes they use the abbreviated title *ה' צבאות* (“Yhwh of hosts [=Sabaoth, *ṣeba’ot*]), and more rarely we find just the words “the one who sits enthroned on the cherubim.” The phrases appear especially in texts that emphasize God’s protecting presence in the temple on Mount Zion (e.g., Psalms 27.2–6, 46.8, 48.9 [note the references to the temple or house of God and its courtyards]; Isaiah 8.18, 18.7). Some of these texts associate Yhwh’s presence with the ark (*אֲרוֹן*), which serves as a footstool or perhaps in some instances as a container for God. A good example bringing together many of these themes is found in Psalm 99:

Yhwh has taken the throne – let the nations tremble!
 The one sitting enthroned on the cherubim – the earth totters.
 Yhwh of Zion¹⁹ is great! He towers above all the nations.
 ...
 Exalt Yhwh our God!
 Bow down before His footstool [viz., the ark]–
 He is the Holy One.

(Psalm 99.1–2, 5)

According to this way of thinking, God’s presence in the period before Solomon built the Jerusalem temple wandered about the land, in or above the ark, or it resided at the earlier temple in Shiloh. Many texts that reflect the Zion-Sabaoth theology evince the belief that in earlier periods the ark sometimes left its abode to go to war. What is crucial for our purposes is that the ark’s movement entailed God’s own movement. Thus, when an old poetic fragment in the Book of Numbers describes the ark going to war and returning, it also refers simply to God’s travel out of and back to its normal place of rest:

When the ark went forth, Moses would say:
 Arise, Yhwh, so that your enemies scatter,
 So that those who hate you flee Your presence!
 And when it [or He] returned, he would say:
 Return, Yhwh, to the myriad thousands of Israel!

(Numbers 10:35–36)

The terminology associated with the Zion-Sabaoth theology and the ark occurs frequently in connection with the Shiloh temple, where God dwelt throughout the period of the Judges (see, e.g., 1 Samuel 1.11). It also occurs often in the story of the ark’s ascent to its new home in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6.2 and 18). This terminology is especially prominent in Psalm 24, which was sung whenever the ark entered the temple – that is, when Yhwh entered the temple. This occurred not just when the ark first entered the temple in Solomon’s time, but on a repeated basis, either after battle or on a holiday such as the New Year’s festival, which commemorated Yhwh’s victory in the primordial battle against chaos.²⁰ Significantly, this psalm refers to

God as “King of *kabod*” (or the “King, the *kabod*, Yhwh of hosts”). To be sure, not all texts that use these terms display what Mettinger calls the Zion-Sabaoth theology; over time, the terms became widespread, and their ideological freight was attenuated. But some groups of texts, especially in Psalms and First Isaiah, use them along with terms for seeing God or the enthronement of God, showing that these were technical terms denoting God’s physical presence.

Some of the texts that reflect the Zion-Sabaoth theology also display the closely related ideology of the inviolability of Zion.²¹ These texts express the doctrine that Yhwh’s physical presence in the temple would always protect the city of Jerusalem, and consequently Jerusalem would never fall. God might decide to punish the nation by bringing a foreign army to invade the land; it was even possible that the enemy would capture or destroy every other city in Judah – but Jerusalem would be spared. Banner examples of this notion are found in Psalms 46 and 48, as well as in many texts in the first section of Isaiah, such as Isaiah 1.7–9, 8.7–15, and 18.3–7. Significantly, the phrase “Yhwh of hosts” appears in all these texts. The idea of God’s presence as protecting Israel also lies behind the military use of the ark in texts like Numbers 10.35–36 and in 1 Samuel 4. The two notions, the Zion-Sabaoth theology and the idea of the inviolability of Zion, worked together to proclaim an especially strong idea of divine immanence. After an initial period of wandering, God had come to rest permanently at Zion. Not only was God present on earth; He was present forever, eternally reliable, constantly approachable, unceasingly protecting.

The locative nature of the Zion-Sabaoth theology is readily evident. The Jerusalem temple was located in the center of the land of Israel, roughly halfway between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. (On a map, Jerusalem is closer to the Jordan River on the eastern edge of the land of Israel, and thus Jerusalem is not midway as the crow or helicopter flies. But we should recall that the southern course of the Jordan River is significantly below sea level, so that a person traveling on foot or by donkey from the Jordan River to Jerusalem faces a steep and grueling incline. As a result, from the ancient person’s point of view, the distance from the Mediterranean to Jerusalem seems roughly similar in length to the distance from the Jordan River to Jerusalem.) Jerusalem is also near the border between the northern and southern tribes. Texts that enunciate the Zion-Sabaoth theology, Mettinger maintains, disclose a “mythical concept of space” (see, e.g., Psalms 14, 48, 76; Isaiah 6), which entails the identity of the temple and heaven. Such a view moves beyond a merely analogical typology in which the earthly temple is a copy of the heavenly.²² The fixed location of the temple on top of Mount Zion, the conception of that mountain as a focal point connecting or in fact merging heaven and earth, and the geographically and conceptually preeminent place of the temple all identify this ideology as locative.

Of course, it became clear with the destruction of Solomon’s temple in 586 B.C.E. that this locative ideology was just plain mistaken. Because the ideology had

played such a central role in Judean thought, its collapse had profound effects on subsequent thinkers, who needed to explain why sacred texts associated with temple worship (the psalms) and writings of authoritative prophets (Isaiah) seemed to be wrong.²³ But even before that event, some Israelites recognized the limitations – and dangers – of this way of thinking about God's presence.

The Wandering Center

When set against texts that glorify the Jerusalem temple, the priestly tabernacle appears to express a different notion of divine presence. The tabernacle, after all, is not limited to one place, for it wanders with the Israelites. P texts, in comparison to the Zion-Sabaoth theology, seem not locative, but what I would describe as *locomotive*: There is a sacred center, but it moves. R. E. Clements points out that the priestly description of the tabernacle does not know any notion of a singular sacred space, in contrast to biblical texts that mention Jerusalem explicitly (Zion psalms; Ezekiel) or allude to it (Deuteronomy). For P,

no longer is the presence of Yhwh associated with a particular place at all, but instead it is related to a cultic community The Priestly Writing has no mention of a particular place, except that Yhwh speaks with Israel from above the cover of the ark, from between the two cherubim. The ark . . . is not a place, however, but a piece of cult-furniture, which, like the tabernacle in which it is set, is portable and moves about with the people.²⁴

As Sara Japhet puts it,

The places where the tabernacle rests have no intrinsic sanctity. As long as the camp, with the tabernacle at its centre, remains in a particular location, the ground occupied by the tabernacle is sacred. But the moment the tabernacle is moved, the spot returns to its previous status Any place can become sacred, but no place is sacred.²⁵

In this sense, P may be said to display an interest in periphery. To be sure, P's theology is not wholly utopian; after all, it positively glories in God's immanence. But the divine presence or *kabod* is not associated with any one locus, and it first became visible to the Israelites and took up residence among them in the wilderness, not in the land of Israel. The axis linking heaven and earth (or at least heaven and the nation Israel) is an ambulatory one. The locomotive model, then, combines aspects of locative and utopian ideologies: At times, the center moves toward the periphery, while points in the periphery can become, temporarily, a center.

The polarity between locative and locomotive conceptions of divine presence can be sensed elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as well. For example, the cherubim accompany God's physical presence throughout the Hebrew Bible. We have already seen that in both the priestly tabernacle and the Solomonic temple, the cherubim serve as a divine throne (Exodus 25.22, 37.7–9; Numbers 7.89; 1 Kings 6.23–28,

8.6–7)²⁶; further, the walls and tapestries in the throne room of the tabernacle and of the temple are adorned with images of cherubim (Exodus 36.8,35; 1 Kings 6.29–35; 2 Chronicles 3.14). In Ezekiel, cherubim accompany God whether God is in the temple or on a journey (e.g., 9.3, 10.1–20, 11.22); similarly, in Psalm 18.11, God rides a cherub through the sky. Eden is God’s garden (Isaiah 51.3, Ezekiel 28.3) and hence a figure of divine presence; after all, God strolls about there (Genesis 3.8). Thus it is significant that cherubim stand at Eden’s entrance (Genesis 3.24) or, according to another tradition, that a cherub once stood in its midst (Ezekiel 28.14). Wherever one finds a cherub (whether as a decorative feature or a mythical creature), one finds divine presence.

Yet, Mettinger points out, the language used to describe God’s place above the cherubim varies.²⁷ In texts that articulate the Zion-Sabaoth theology, God is יושב כרובים – “He who sits on the cherubim.” Texts using that phrase are often suffused with locative terminology. We have seen that the phrase appears in the first verse of Psalm 99, which goes on to refer to Zion, the sacred hill (verses 2 and 9), the royal footstool denoting God’s enthroned presence (verse 5), and the pillar of cloud (עמוד ענן) signifying the divine indwelling (verse 7). The phrase “He who sits on the cherubim” also appears in 2 Samuel 6.2, which describes the arrival of the ark and hence of God in Jerusalem, and in 1 Kings 6.23–35 and 8.6–7, which posit the presence of God in the holy of holies at the Jerusalem temple.²⁸ But Psalm 18.11 (=2 Samuel 22.11) describes Yhwh as riding (רכב) a cherub, and thus it connects the cherub – and with it the notion of divine presence – to the locomotive rather than locative model.²⁹

Similarly, Clements distinguishes between the Jerusalemite theology of sacred center, with its single great temple, and a more decentralized theology in the religion of the patriarchs, which he (following Albrecht Alt) views as focusing on gods associated with the patriarchs. “The important feature of this religion for our study,” he says,

is that the gods were not thought to be connected with specific places, as was general for the Els and Baals of the Canaanites, but to certain groups of people For the patriarchs, their gods were not associated with the soil, nor with special holy places, but were bound together with their worshipers and were believed to accompany them on their wanderings. In accordance with the semi-nomadic life of the ancestors of the Israelites, so their gods also were believed to move from place to place as the leaders of their adherents Thus the gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were markedly different from the gods of Canaan, and a particular feature of this distinctiveness lay in the manner and nature of the divine presence In the one the presence of the gods was linked with definite persons, and in the other with certain definite places.³⁰

Further, Clements argues, in premonarchic Israel, the main conception of Yhwh’s presence involved the reenactment of Yhwh’s arrival at or from Sinai.³¹ Thus God’s presence was not linked to any one site in the land of Israel but to an event outside the land in which community, not place, was of paramount importance, and

God was conceived as being present only temporarily. After the establishment of a strong centralized monarchy with its seat in the formerly Jebusite city of Jerusalem, a more settled idea of presence crystallized in Israel. Clements connects this more locative model to Canaanite influence (more specifically, to the influence of the Jebusite population of Jerusalem, who remained there after David's conquest of the city and simply became Judeans). He claims that the decentralized theology, with its connections both to the patriarchal and the Sinai periods, was more originally Israelite.³²

In the years since the publication of Clements' book, scholars have come to reject the assumptions on which his approach to the history and derivation of these two ideas is based. Alt's thesis regarding the "gods of the fathers" has been debunked³³; the very existence of the patriarchal period is doubted by historians; and many scholars today would reject the neat opposition between Israelite and Canaanite culture on which Clements' reconstruction rests. In fact, the model that Clements terms more Israelite has strong Canaanite affinities. The phrase *rkb 'rpt* ["riding on the clouds"] describes the Canaanite god Baal in Northwest Semitic and Akkadian texts.³⁴ The same root, רכב ("rides"), expresses the locomotive model in reference to Yhwh in Deuteronomy 33.26, Isaiah 19.1, Habakkuk 3.3–8, and Psalm 18.10–11, 68.5–9, and 104.3. (Interestingly, two of these texts, Habakkuk 3.3–8 and Psalm 68.5–9, associate Yhwh's riding through the heaven with the wilderness south of Canaan; it is there, too, that P portrays Yhwh as wandering in the tabernacle.)

Nonetheless, Clements' description of a tension between two types of thinking in the Hebrew Bible remains useful. Regardless of whether there ever was a patriarchal period, the Book of Genesis does portray Israel's ancestors as practicing a religion in which divine presence was less oriented toward space than toward clan, and the activities of these ancestors provide a model for their descendants. Genesis uses narratives about the patriarchs to represent a particular religious ideal, and this ideal demands our attention – even if it is a product of the Iron Age rather than the Late Bronze Age in which the patriarchs were said to live, even if it reflects the values of a settled people rather than the lifestyle of nomads, and even if it originated within the land of Canaan rather than outside it.³⁵ Similarly, poetic and priestly texts do portray God as traveling from the desert south of the land of Israel, in contrast to royal and Jerusalemite models of presence. The Torah and some poetic texts from Psalms and Habakkuk, then, present a locomotive notion of divine presence at odds with the locative model associated with the temple in Kings and Zion psalms.

Context, then, is all: The priestly tabernacle can be read to symbolize both locative and locomotive worldviews, depending on whether we set it against E's tent or the Jerusalem temple. The dual value of P's tabernacle is also indicated by its two names. Menahem Haran points that a

fundamental distinction [between the P and E tents] is already evident in the very names of the two institutions: the word *miškān*, tabernacle, indicates the place where

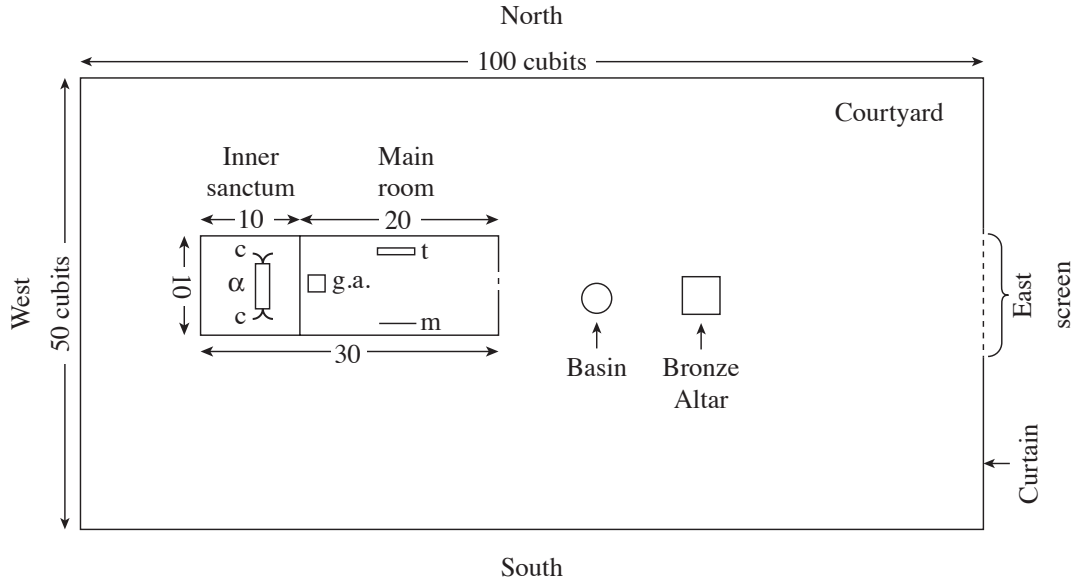
God *šôkēn*, dwells, i.e., his abode; whereas *’ohel mō’ēd* [“Tent of Meeting”] (the latter noun being derived from the root *y’d*) describes the place to which he comes at an appointed time, the tent to the entrance of which he descends in response to prophetic invocation, only to leave it when the communion with him is over.³⁶

It is significant, then, that P also uses the term “tent of meeting” (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד) for the tabernacle. Looked at within the Torah’s sign system, the structure is a dwelling (בְּשֹׁכֵן), in opposition to E’s tent of meeting; but within the larger sign system of the Tanakh, it is a tent of meeting, in opposition to the divine dwelling place built by Solomon. Although Haran claims that P uses these terms “indiscriminately, without intending any difference in meaning,”³⁷ in fact their use discloses an important friction within P.³⁸ The tension between two orientations toward divine presence in the Hebrew Bible, then, exists within P itself.³⁹

Tabernacle and Temple

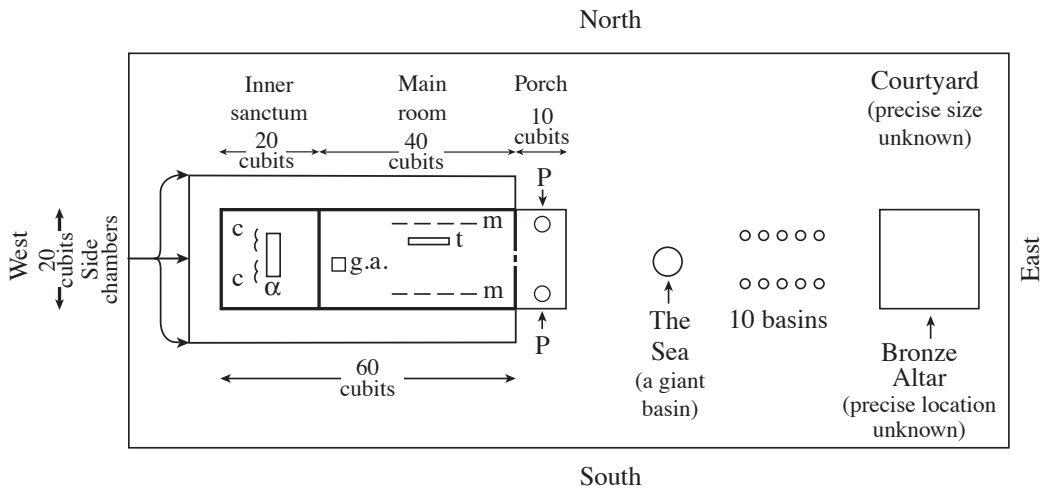
Against this line of reasoning, however, one might argue that the priestly source intends the tabernacle to be taken as a symbol for the temple to begin with, and therefore the thematic contrast I posit between P’s tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple is impossible. According to this objection to my reasoning, P (like the source responsible for Deuteronomy, or D) limits sacrifice to a single site, and to represent that site P uses the tabernacle.⁴⁰ Its location in the center of the camp (recalling the location of Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel) could be said to demonstrate this linkage.⁴¹ Similarly, the tabernacle as described in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40 and Solomon’s temple as described in 1 Kings 6–7 display the same basic architectural plan, and they contain the same furnishings.⁴² Each structure was surrounded by an outer courtyard, and this courtyard contained a large bronze altar used for sacrificial offerings, as well as large water basins (one in the tabernacle courtyard, and ten large basins and one huge basin in the temple courtyard).⁴³ Each structure had a rectangular footprint (see [Illustrations 1a-b](#)). At the eastern end of both rectangular structures, just beyond the altar in the courtyard, was the entrance. In both cases the entrance led to the main room of the structure, beyond which was a smaller room known as the *debir* (inner sanctum) or *qodesh qodashim* (holy of holies).

To be sure, this basic rectangular shape and division into a main long room and an inner sanctum were conventional for Syro-Palestinian temples of the Bronze and Iron Ages generally (see [Illustration 1c](#)); consequently, one might assert that both the Solomonic temple and the Mosaic tabernacle follow a common pattern known through the Northwest Semitic areas in the Bronze and Iron Ages. But the special connection between the priestly tabernacle and the Solomonic temple remains clear because of additional parallels that link them with each other and with no other rectangular temples of the Bronze and Iron Ages. First, the



- α = Ark
- g.a. = Golden altar
- m = Menorah
- c = Cherubs (Kerubim) (2)
- t = Table

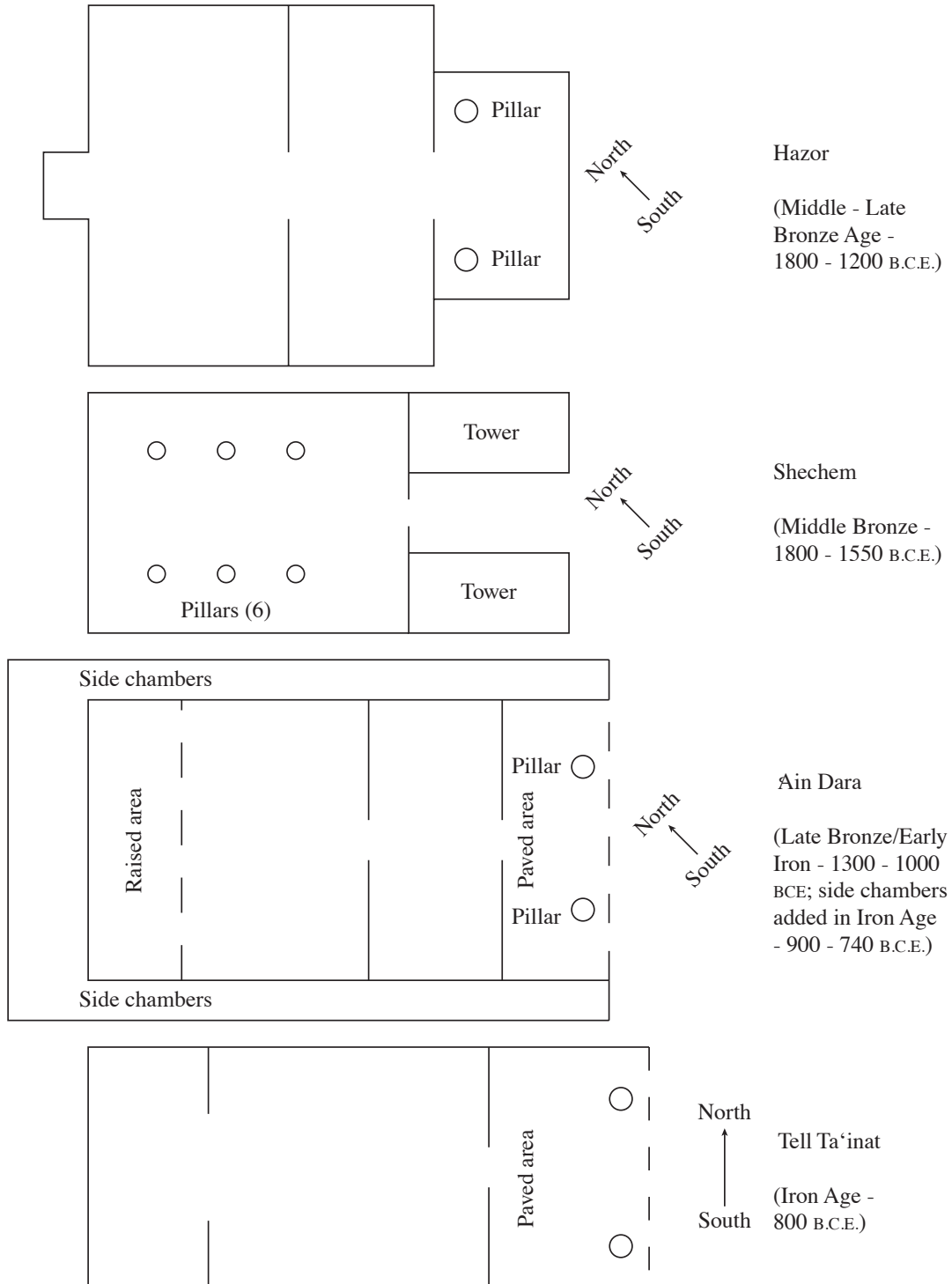
1a. The Priestly tabernacle according to Exodus 25–40.



- c = Cherubs (Kerubim) (2)
- g.a. = Golden altar
- m = Menorahs (10)
- t = Table
- α = Ark
- P = Pillars (2)

Note: The main structure of the temple is rendered in dark lines (—). Side structures attached to the temple (side chambers and the porch) are in a lighter line (—).

1b. Solomon's temple according to 1 Kings 6–7.



1c. Other Syro-Palestinian temples.

priestly tabernacle and the Solomonic temple share an east-west orientation that is not common to all rectangular Syro-Palestinian temples (that is, the longer walls of both the Solomonic temple and priestly tabernacle go east to west, and the inner sanctum is on the western side of the structure).⁴⁴ Second, the ratio of

the length of the long walls to the short walls in both the priestly tabernacle and the Solomonic temple is precisely 1:3. (The temple also had a front porch [*ulam*] that was ten cubits deep, which may have been uncovered and whose measurement is not considered as part of the temple building itself in 1 Kings 6.2–3.⁴⁵) Third, the furnishings of the two structures are nearly identical. The main room of the priestly tabernacle contained a table on one side and a lamp or *menorah* on the other; the main room or *heikhal* of the (considerably larger) temple contained a table and ten lamps or *menorot* (five on each side).⁴⁶ Both main rooms also housed a small altar made of gold, located at the western side of the room. The inner sanctum of both the priestly tabernacle and the Solomonic temple contained the ark, and above it sat two golden *cherubim* with outstretched wings. Finally, the layouts of both tabernacle and temple evinced a pattern of increasing holiness, which was expressed by the value of materials in terms of workmanship and expense. This pattern manifested itself as one moved closer to the inner sanctum and also to the line bisecting the long side of the rectangles formed by the structures themselves and the courtyards around them.⁴⁷

In short, one could object to my thesis of a contrast between Solomon's temple and the P's tabernacle by claiming that the tabernacle is nothing other than a symbol of the temple retrojected back into the period of the wandering in the desert, and thus the two structures cannot serve as tokens for opposing religious worldviews. Several factors militate against this challenge.

First, even if the tabernacle does constitute what we might term a forward-looking allusion to the Jerusalem temple, the fact remains that the entire complex of priestly documents in the Pentateuch (and in Joshua, for that matter) never mentions the possibility that a temple will one day be built. In contrast to D, P never even suggests that the divine presence or some representative thereof will come to rest forever in one spot.⁴⁸ The rhetoric P uses to describe the tabernacle carries weight that interpreters must take into account, and this rhetoric valorizes that which is portable and utopian while studiously avoiding any reference to a specific or permanent sacred spot.

Second, the idealized blueprint that P presents in Exodus 25–39 draws on two architectural models: on portable tent sanctuaries used by ancient Semitic nomads, and on the Solomonic temple. Indeed, in some respects the tabernacle's plan is closer to that of a genuine ancient Semitic tent shrine than to Solomon's temple. Ancient Semitic tent shrines known from Arabia and Syria held betyls (that is, the presence of the god), traveled through the desert, and were made of red leather (as opposed to the usual black tent of Semitic nomads). Similarly, the priestly tabernacle held Yhwh's *kabod*, traveled through the desert, and was covered with red leather (see, e.g., Exodus 25.5, 25.23, 26.14, 35.7, and 36.19). The use of acacia wood rather than olive or oak for building the ark and various elements of the tabernacle calls a desert setting to mind, because it comes from a tree common in the deserts south and southwest of Canaan.⁴⁹ To be sure, the tabernacle was much

larger than Arabian tent shrines, which typically were carried on the back of a camel or a group of camels. But these parallels show that the tabernacle cannot be regarded solely as a token for the temple. Indeed, although many modern scholars contend that the priestly tabernacle is a fiction invented by priests in the exilic era to represent Solomon's temple, Daniel Fleming shows that several aspects of the tabernacle's plan as P presents it in fact recall large tent sanctuaries used by Northwest Semites in Late Bronze Age Mari. Large tent sanctuaries were in fact used by the Israelites' neighbors and ancestors. Both these tent sanctuaries and the biblical tabernacle were built with wooden beams (called קרש, *qeresh* in Hebrew and *qersu[m]* in Mari Akkadian). Thus the picture found in Exodus 25–40 is neither anachronistic nor completely unrealistic.⁵⁰ Consequently, the priestly tabernacle cannot be regarded as nothing more than a cipher for the temple. The tabernacle's architectural plan reflects its twofold significance. To the extent that it alludes to the Jerusalem temple, it highlights a stable center, but to the extent that it recalls a desert tent, it emphasizes the periphery.

Third, although the P document in its final form does advocate, or at least assume, cult centralization,⁵¹ P's vision of cult centralization and D's are not the same. D repeatedly insists that God will choose one particular place where His Name will dwell, and only there can sacrifice be performed. Deuteronomy's insistently repeated phrasing, "the place God will choose" (see 12.5, 11, 14, 18, 21; 14.23, 24, 25; 15.2, 7, 11, 15, 16; 16.6; 17.8, 10; 18.6; 23.17; 26.2, 9; 31.11), makes clear that D has in mind a specific location: The singular form of the noun "place" anticipates that only one such place will exist. Deuteronomistic literature identifies that place as the temple Solomon built in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8.29, 11.36, 14.21). The Deuteronomistic authors specify that God chose to place His Name there "forever" (1 Kings 9.3), eliminating any doubt on this matter. In short, the deuteronomic tradition not only requires the centralization of the cult; it requires that the Israelites centralize the cult at one particular location.⁵² For D and Dtr, it is unimaginable that one might move the temple from Jerusalem to Bethel, or from Mount Zion in Jerusalem to some other hill there, even if that new temple were to be the only one where sacrifice took place.⁵³

P's approach to centralization differs. The priestly authors in the Pentateuch never allude to a particular spot where sacrifice must take place. So far as one can tell from the language found in P, where the single altar will be located does not matter, so long as it is the only altar in all Israel. The priestly tradition requires only centralization, not centralization in any specific location. In a series of priestly passages in the Book of Joshua, P recognizes that the single sanctuary was briefly located at Gilgal (Joshua 4.19, 5.10)⁵⁴ and that it later moved to Shiloh, where it remained for generations (Joshua 18.1 and 19.51, both of which specifically mention the tent of meeting at Shiloh).⁵⁵ By way of contrast, deuteronomic authors do not mention any places that served as the focus of cult centralization before the time of

Solomon, as if some other spot had temporarily served as “the place God chooses.” On the contrary, from Joshua 24 to 1 Kings 2, as Alexander Rofé points out, Dtr

often mentions various places of worship in Israel – Shechem, Ophrah of Abiezer, Mizpah, Gilad, Bethel, Mizpah (in Benjaminite territory), Gilgal, Ramah, Hebron, and others. And these places, which contravene the law of cult-unification, are mentioned with neither censure nor justification.⁵⁶

Deuteronomic literature does not describe any of these places as housing a temple, because there was only one temple, located on Mount Zion, which was yet to be built. P, on the other hand, unhesitatingly applies cultic language to Gilgal and Shiloh, because for P these places had the same status that Jerusalem would one day have. From P's point of view, it is immaterial whether the *kabod* and the sacrificial cult surrounding It will remain in Jerusalem forever or whether they will wander to some other locale. Indeed, Ezekiel looks forward to the rebuilding of a temple (Chapters 40–48) and to the *kabod*'s entry into its Holy of Holies (43.3) – yet, for all the detail Ezekiel provides about the disposition of real estate in the reestablished commonwealth, nowhere does he identify the city where the temple will be located as Jerusalem. He says only that it will be located in the middle of the land of Israel. Precisely where that median point will turn out to be is not specified; as far as Ezekiel's careful language allows us to know, it might be Jerusalem, but it could perfectly well turn out to be Bethel, or Ophrah, or some previously uninhabited spot.⁵⁷

In spite of their doctrine of cult centralization, then, the priestly traditions are not fully invested in the eternal sacrality of any one place.⁵⁸ The portability of the tabernacle, then, is appropriate: It is Yhwh's physical presence, the *kabod*, that renders a spot holy, and holiness does not inhere in any spot itself. Hence even though the priestly descriptions of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–40 allude forward to Solomon's temple, they do not unreservedly authorize an ideology of a single sacred center. P's language allows one at least to imagine that the *kabod* could leave the center and move to another location, and hence P's ideology of sacred space is not as firmly established as that found in locative texts elsewhere in the Tanakh.

Roots of the Duality in P

The priestly document of the Pentateuch, then, is at once centripetal and centrifugal in its attitude toward sacred space. This inner-priestly incongruity does not simply result from multiple layers of composition (though there can be little doubt that P is a complex amalgamation of traditions).⁵⁹ Further, it does not result from the recasting of older texts in the era after the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 B.C.E. Rather, it reflects a particular religious sensibility, a certain way of struggling with conflicting perceptions of the divine. This sensibility need

not be the product of any one moment in history. This point must be stressed, because so many biblical scholars explain P's notion of divine presence as resulting from geo-political conditions, reducing it to nothing more than a historical reaction.

Many studies of divine presence in P begin with an assertion that P was written or completed some time after 586 (an assertion with which many, though not all, biblical scholars agree). These studies then move on to find a reading of P that allegedly fits this time period. In studies such as these (which include, among others, those of Bernd Janowski and Tryggve Mettinger), a speculative dating of the text determines the text's interpretation. This interpretive practice is especially clear in the work of the many modern scholars (for example, G. E. Wright, Frank Moore Cross, and Ronald Clements) who maintain that P's notion of divine presence involves what they call God's "tabernacling." Scholars use this verb frequently, no doubt in order to call to mind John 1.14, which describes how God, in the form of the Word (that is, Jesus), came to dwell on earth⁶⁰: "And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled [or "encamped; Greek, ἐσκήνωσεν⁶¹] among us, and we looked at His glory [Greek, δόξαν, the same term that usually renders *kabod* in the Septuagint translation of Hebrew scripture], glory as of the only son begotten by the Father, full of grace and truth." This is an important verse, and not only because it appears on the seal of Northwestern University, whose generous sabbatical policies have led to the words you are now reading. In recalling this verse, scholars such as Wright, Cross, and Clements rightly emphasize themes that link the priestly tabernacle, the Jerusalem temple, and Jesus. All three of these are presented in scripture (whether Jewish and Christian scripture, in the case of tabernacle and temple, or Christian scripture in the case of Jesus) as attempts by the transcendent God to become immanent and accessible in the world God created.

When these scholars use the verb "tabernacle" (that is, "encamp, dwell temporarily in a tent") rather than "dwell" to translate the Hebrew *יָשַׁב* that describes God's presence in priestly writings, they emphasize that the priests portray God's presence on earth as fleeting.⁶² The priestly notion of divine tabernacling, according to these scholars, results from the destruction of the temple in 586. This event, we are told, forced priestly circles to admit that God was not always resident in Zion. From 586 on, the priests could not avoid the conclusion that divine immanence was always subject to divine transcendence. For this reason, they used the root *יָשַׁב* (usually translated "dwell") to refer to God's impermanent presence in the tabernacle, reserving the root *יָשַׁב* (in its most basic meaning, "sit") to refer to God's permanent dwelling in heaven. Cross provides an apt summary of this line of thinking, according to which the priestly notion of "tabernacling" was a response to the rupture of the Zion covenant in 586: "Theologically speaking, [the priests] strove after a solution to the problems of covenant theology; the means through which the breached covenant might be repaired, and the conditions under which a holy and universal God might 'tabernacle' in the midst of Israel."⁶³

The approach of these scholars does not recommend itself for several reasons. First, the distinction between the verbs שָׁכַב (dwell) and יָשָׁב (sit) that their theory posits is simply untenable. The former verb can in fact refer in biblical Hebrew to permanent dwelling: It is modified with adjectives meaning “forever” (לְעוֹלָם, לְדוֹר וָדוֹר) in Isaiah 34.17, Jeremiah 7.7, Ezekiel 43.7, Psalm 37.27, and 1 Chronicles 23.25. These cases leave no doubt that this verb can refer to remaining in one place eternally.⁶⁴ Second, although these scholars sense that P’s *kabod* theology navigates a tension between immanence and transcendence, their insistence on dating this theology to the exile obscures the timeless nature of the religious dilemma at hand and limits their explanation to a narrowly historical one. Third, by restricting themselves to categories of immanence and transcendence, these scholars overlook the extent to which the texts are grappling with conceptions of sacred place, which are better approached through Smith’s more supple models of locative and utopian mindsets. Finally, any dating of P is by definition speculative and, in light of the lack of consensus on this issue among biblical scholars, questionable.⁶⁵ Consequently, one would do better to analyze the P texts on their own, without starting from the presumption that they date from the period after the events of 586 or, for that matter, before them.

In arguing against those who seem unwilling to interpret perceptions of divine immanence as anything other than reactions to a particular historical event in the sixth century B.C.E., I am influenced by Moshe Idel and, more broadly, Mircea Eliade. Following these thinkers, I maintain 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.⁶⁶ Attempts to portray religious ideas as reactions to historical factors often avoid grappling with these ideas’ deep humanistic significance. From a methodological point of view, this sort of historicist reductionism represents (and here I introduce a technical term that is not used frequently enough in discussions of method in religious studies) what we may call a *cop-out*. Indeed, this book really consists of one long protest against the historicist reductionism so common among modern biblical scholars, a reductionism that does a disservice both to the Bible and to historicism.

The duality we have noted in the priestly tabernacle results from the tension between two religious impulses, neither of which is confined to a particular period, place, or culture.⁶⁷ One impulse emphasizes what the theorist of religion Rudolph Otto called *fascinans*, the aspect of divinity that humans find alluring and appealing.⁶⁸ This impulse produces a desire to approach the divine, and hence it reflects a hope that God is locatable, even in a physical sense. Indeed, it reflects a sense that God can somehow become usable. Such a divinity is the foundation of order. The other impulse is rooted in what Otto calls the *tremendum* – the overwhelming, dangerous, and repelling aspects of the divine. For this viewpoint, the divine realm must be a realm of absolute freedom, and hence the divine cannot be confined to a single place and can never be confidently located by humans. Examples of these

impulses can be found throughout the history of religions, often in a single tradition. In some religions, each one becomes associated with particular gods; thus in Mesopotamia, *fascinans* is aligned especially with Tammuz and with personal gods, and *tremendum* with the high god, Anu.⁶⁹ In Israel, both are associated with a single divinity, and various texts emphasize one or the other. The genius of P's model of the tent is that it encompasses both, that it is at once centripetal and centrifugal. The term "tent of meeting" is thus quite apt for P's tabernacle: It brings together two opposed conceptions of divine presence.

Priestly Traditions and Zion-Sabaoth Traditions Compared

Priestly traditions in the Pentateuch differ from texts espousing the Zion-Sabaoth tradition in three crucial respects. Although the priestly texts use their picture of the tabernacle to allude to a centralized cult, they never specifically mention a holy city or a permanent temple. Instead, they portray God's presence as wandering along with the Israelites, attached to a people but not to a place. Second, the priestly admonishments in Leviticus 26 warn about an eventuality that many Zion-Sabaoth texts such as First Isaiah and some psalms regard as impossible: If Israel's sins reach a tipping point, God will allow the holy place to be destroyed. Third, at least some of the Zion-Sabaoth texts acknowledge that God can be literally present in more than one place. Some of them openly assert that God is located both in a heavenly palace and in the Jerusalem temple. Thus Psalm 76 begins by telling us that Yhwh "is in His sheltered spot, Shalem [a poetic form of the name Jerusalem], and His dwelling place is in Zion" (וַיְהִי בְשֵׁלֶם סֵכּוֹ וּמִעֲנֹתָיו בְּצִיּוֹן, verse 3). But it goes on to locate Yhwh in heaven, whence God promulgates justice (verse 9). Similarly, God is found both in the temple and in heaven in Psalms 14.2,7 and 20.3,7. These texts exemplify the fluidity model discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. There is no reason to see a contradiction in these texts or to view their language as metaphorical. For them, God is unbounded by the law of the conservation of matter, so that the bodies of Yhwh can reside in both heaven and Zion. No priestly text, on the other hand, suggests that God is still in heaven after coming down to dwell in the tabernacle. On the contrary, the descent of God from heaven to Mount Sinai in Exodus 19 and then into the tabernacle in Exodus 40 is so momentous precisely because the priestly authors are talking about God's one body, and hence about the decision of the transcendent God to become fully immanent.

Nonetheless, these two theologies share a crucial characteristic. Both regard Yhwh as being physically present on the earth, enthroned between two cherubim above the ark. Both are committed to the reality of divine immanence. In fact, the priestly theology is a variant of the Zion-Sabaoth theology, differing from it only in regard to questions of location (must the divine throne be specifically in Zion?), duration (will God remain on the earthly throne forever?), and fluidity (does God's presence down here preclude simultaneous divine presence up there?).

The priestly authors do not reject the basic theological insight of the Zion-Sabaoth texts, according to which Yhwh desires a home on earth and chooses Israel to build that home.

It is the other antifluidity tradition that rejects this model altogether. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), the authors of the Book of Deuteronomy and the editors who produced the Deuteronomistic history in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings insisted that God remained in heaven even after the temple was built. Although they were no less anthropomorphic than other biblical thinkers (they never deny that God has a body), these authors develop what might be called a practical or perceptual limit to anthropomorphism: God's body is always located outside this world and is never seen, even from behind a cloud, by any human. The way these traditions understand the temple and its contents deserves attention.

ARK, TENT, AND TEMPLE IN DEUTERONOMIC TRADITIONS

The Book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history understand the temple and its contents in their own complex way. On the one hand, D and Dtr focus intensely on the holy city, much more so than the priestly texts do (and in this regard they resemble some of the Zion-Sabaoth texts). On the other hand, D and Dtr also restrict or even deny that city's holiness. As with their priestly counterparts, then, the deuteronomic traditions display a striking duality. Their emphasis on unity rather than fluidity appears at first to lead to the exaltation of the one sacred space, but in the end these deuteronomic traditions also deflate the pretensions of that space.

This duality manifests itself in the ways that the deuteronomic traditions regard the tent and the ark. D never mentions the tent of meeting. (The tent does appear in Deuteronomy 31.13–15, but this passage stems from E, not D. Although the D source is responsible for the bulk of Deuteronomy, the last several chapters of the book include J, E, and P material.) D's lack of reference to the tent is not surprising, because neither E's tent nor P's was possible in D's worldview. Both conceptions of the tent involved divine immanence – fleeting immanence in E's tent (which had a purely prophetic role) and ongoing immanence in P's (which had both prophetic and cultic roles). In E, God would come down in a cloud to vouchsafe a revelation to Moses; in P, God came down and exchanged the cloud for the tent, dwelling there without interruption for centuries. But for D, God never came down to earth at all, and consequently no sacred tent of any sort was necessary.

D does preserve the idea of an ark, but it is no longer the footstool for God that it is in P and other biblical texts (e.g., 1 Chronicles 28.2, and cf. Psalms 99.5, 132.7; Lamentations 2.1). Moshe Weinfeld describes the role of the ark in D quite clearly:

The specific and exclusive function of the ark, according to the book of Deuteronomy, is to house the tablets of the covenant (10:1–5); no mention is made of the ark cover

(כַּפְרֵת) and the cherubim which endow the ark with the semblance of a divine chariot or throne (compare Exod. 25:10–22=P). The holiest vessel of the Israelite cult performs, in the deuteronomic view, nothing more than an educational function: it houses the tablets upon which the words of God are engraved, and at its side the Book of the Torah is laid from which one reads to the people so that they may learn to fear the Lord (Deut. 31:26; cf. vv. 12 and 13).⁷⁰

Where other biblical texts put God, Deuteronomy puts words that came from God. The ark remains significant, but now it houses symbols rather than divinity. Consequently, it is no longer holy in the same way the ark is for P. The Deuteronomistic historians also emphasize this point: “Nothing was in the ark other than the two tablets of stone which Moses put there while at Mount Horeb” (1 Kings 8.9).

Much the same thing can be said of the temple itself, which according to D houses a name (*shem*) rather than a body (*kabod*). The conception of the temple in P and the Zion-Sabaoth traditions is theocentric. The tabernacle and the temple were about the God who lived there, who rescued the Israelites from slavery specifically so that they would build a dwelling place for God (see Exodus 29.46).⁷¹ In contrast, D’s conception of the temple was anthropocentric. The temple was about the Israelites, who went to the temple to worship.⁷² For D, God never visits the Jerusalem temple; only Israelites do.⁷³

Here we arrive at an irony that pervades deuteronomic thinking. The deuteronomic writers, in both Deuteronomy itself and in the historical books that follow it, exalt Jerusalem. The deuteronomists tell us that Jerusalem is unique, for it and only it is the city chosen by God. Temporary dwelling places of the Israelite cult prior to the era of David and Solomon were just that: temporary, contingent.⁷⁴ They were places that humans chose while waiting for God’s choice to be made known. (The contrast with the many temporary dwelling places of the priestly tabernacle in Numbers is telling. These places were chosen by the *kabod* Itself as It led the tabernacle to each resting place.) For the deuteronomists, then, Jerusalem was divinely designated, the one place that differs from all others on earth. Yet the same deuteronomic movement that established the unique superiority of Jerusalem also diminished the status of the holy city by denying that God lived there.

Indeed, one wonders whether the word “holy” applies to Jerusalem as understood by the deuteronomists at all.⁷⁵ Only once does D use the noun קֹדֶשׁ (holiness, the holy) to refer to a place, in Deuteronomy 26.15, and there it refers to heaven, not to the earthly temple whose divine choice D mentions so frequently. P, on the other hand, uses this noun to refer to the tabernacle scores of times, sometimes (e.g., Exodus 26.33–34) distinguishing between the main hall of the tabernacle, which was the קֹדֶשׁ (holy place), and the inner sanctum beyond the main hall, which was the קֹדֶשׁ הַקֹּדְשִׁים (holy of holies). Similarly, D uses the adjective קֹדֶשׁ several times (Deuteronomy 7.6, 14.2 and 21, 26.19, and 28.9) to refer to the nation Israel, but never to refer to the temple or its location.⁷⁶ In P, by way of contrast, this adjective

frequently describes the enclosure surrounding the tabernacle, where sacrifice took place (e.g., Exodus 23.19; Leviticus 6.9, 7.6, et al.; see also Ezekiel 42.13).⁷⁷ When one compares the use of the terms “holy” and “holiness” in D and P, it becomes clear that D does not really have a concept of sacred space. For the deuteronomists, Jerusalem was the chosen city, but not the divine city. Yhwh was not a Jerusalemite’s neighbor.⁷⁸

D’s attitude toward the idea of sacred space differs not only from P’s but also from that of the fluidity traditions. The fluidity traditions see any site (or at least any site in the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) as potentially holy. A *maṣṣebah* or *’asherah* might be consecrated anywhere, and hence sacrifice might occur anywhere. These texts mix a stance oriented toward immanence, which one normally would associate with a locative worldview, with a strong element of the utopian: There is no one Sacred Center, since the land of Israel bears many sacred centers. D, on the other hand, mixes a locative worldview (which one normally would associate with immanence) with a theology of transcendence: There is one Center. Nonetheless, that unique Center is not sacred in the sense of being directly touched by divinity. It is merely chosen.

Ark and temple for D, then, are set apart, but not otherworldly. Neither ark nor temple is the site of theophany. Indeed, for D a theophany, in the basic sense of an appearance of God, has never occurred and will never occur on the planet Earth. To be sure, D does not regard ark and temple as constructed – that is, as resulting from human convention or action. According to the deuteronomists, the ark contains words spoken and written by God, and God ordered that written records of those words be placed in the ark whose manufacture He commanded (Deuteronomy 10.1–4). The temple’s location was God’s choice, not Israel’s. Nevertheless, having identified one uniquely chosen place, D shears that place of its supernatural connotations. There is a duality, though no self-contradiction, in D’s attitude toward the temple and toward the ark located inside it. The deuteronomists took pains to guarantee that one side of that duality would not overcome the other and, in particular, to make sure that the special nature of these artifacts would not lead people to see them as magical objects or as the earthly residence of the divine. The deuteronomists invest considerable effort to guard against the misinterpretation of the chosen as the divine, or the unique as the magical. This effort is especially evident in one section of the Deuteronomistic history: the ark narrative in 1 Samuel 4–6, to which we now turn.

The Ark Narrative

Scholars have long recognized that 1 Samuel 4–6 constitute a distinct unit within the Book of Samuel, which has its own concerns and vocabulary. Samuel, who is the focus of attention in chapters 1–3 and 7–8 and following, does not appear in these chapters at all. Instead, the ark itself is the main character of these chapters.

For these and other reasons, the biblical scholar Leonhard Rost argued in 1926 that these chapters, as well as 2 Samuel 6, are based on an older text that has been edited into the Books of Samuel.⁷⁹ Although Rost's thesis has been widely accepted, many scholars have pointed out the many respects in which these chapters are intimately linked to those immediately before and after them both thematically and linguistically.⁸⁰ It seems clear that the Deuteronomistic historians utilized an older composition about the ark, integrating it into the longer book they created. In so doing, they created a unit that reflects more than one attitude toward the ark, and the dynamic between these two views is a fascinating, if overlooked, aspect of these chapters.⁸¹

The ark narrative as found in the final form of the Book of Samuel presents a debate between two ways of understanding divine presence. One of these is known to us from P's *kabod* theology and from the theology of the Zion-Sabaoth texts, in which the ark provides a resting place for the body of God; the other is the deuteronomistic *shem* theology, in which the ark houses only the verbal record of God's covenant and not God's physical presence. These chapters repeatedly allude to both theologies, but in the end they reject the former while endorsing the latter. Nevertheless, they make clear that the ark remains mysteriously potent. The ark narrative demotes the ark by insisting that God does not live in it or on it, even as it acknowledges the ark's gravity and importance to God. The tension the ark narrative displays may result in part from these chapters' multilayered nature; underlying the current text may be an older story that endorsed the more literal or physical theology that the current text rejects. More importantly, however, the tension suggests that the Deuteronomistic historians remained ambivalent about the ark.

The narrative in 1 Samuel 4 begins by telling the story of the battle of Ebenezer. The Israelites, sorely beset by the Philistine army, decide to take the ark to the battlefield from its home in the Shiloh temple. This decision conforms to the martial role of the ark found in texts such as Numbers 10.35. The Israelites bring the ark to battle with the expectation that it will cause their enemies – Yhwh's enemies – to scatter and those who hate them to flee. To the Israelites' dismay, however, the Philistines rout the Israelites and capture the ark. In [chapter 5](#) the Philistines place the ark in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. Now it is the Philistines' turn to be surprised. On entering the temple the next day, the Philistine priests find the statue of Dagon prostrate before the ark. They set the statue aright, only to discover the next morning not only that Dagon is again prostrate but also that the statue's arms and head have been severed. Dagon is not the only victim. The Ashdodites begin to suffer from some sort of tumors or swelling (probably bubonic plague). They send the ark to another Philistine city, where the same plague terrorizes the populace. The ark is then sent to several additional cities, and each suffers from the plague in turn. The Philistines decide in [chapter 6](#) to return the ark to the Israelites, putting it on a cart pulled by several cows. Though the

cows are not led by a driver, they go against their nature by leaving the calves they are nursing to lead the ark to Israelite territory.

The Israelites at the border town of Beth Shemesh are initially delighted to see the ark coming to them. When some of them look into the ark, however, they are struck down by some pestilence. The inhabitants of Beth Shemesh call a levitical family from the nearby town of Kiryat-Ye'arim to take the ark, because Levites are the professionals designated to deal with it (recall that according to the Book of Numbers the Levites were in charge of carrying the ark from place to place as the Israelites moved through the Sinai desert). The Levites safely take the ark to their town, where it remains until David's time.⁸² The ark has one last disaster in store, however. Years later, 2 Samuel 6 informs us, King David resolves to bring the ark to his new capital city, Jerusalem. During the ark's journey to its new home, it teeters briefly, threatening to fall off its cart. A man named Uzzah puts his hand out to steady the ark and is instantly killed. The procession stops, but three months later David has the ark complete its journey to Jerusalem, where his son Solomon will one day bring it into the temple he builds.

The ark narrative repeatedly alludes to the issue of divine presence. In its first verses, it applies a fascinating and rather long epithet to the ark: ארון ברית ה' צבאות ישב הכרובים ("The ark of the covenant of Yhwh who sits enthroned on the cherubim," 1 Samuel 4.4). The first several words, "the ark of the covenant of Yhwh," constitute the normal term for the ark used in deuteronomic literature (e.g., Deuteronomy 10.8; 31.9, 25, 26; Joshua 3.3, 4.7; Judges 20.27; 2 Samuel 15.24; 1 Kings 3.15). These opening words identify the ark as the chest in which the covenant documents were kept and reflect the deuteronomic authors' conception of the ark as a receptacle for texts that teach about God. The last words of the phrase in 1 Samuel 4.4, however, allude to the Zion-Sabaoth theology, according to which God was physically present above the ark on the two cherubim attached to its golden cover. The phrasing used to describe the ark suggests a question that will be asked again and again as this narrative progresses: Which one is it – the ark of the covenant or the ark of the enthroned God? Does the ark house texts symbolizing divinity or the deity's real presence?⁸³

Something like the Zion-Sabaoth theology is expressed quite clearly by several characters in the text. Unfortunately for proponents of that theology, those characters are the Israelites' arch-enemies, the Philistines. When the Philistines hear that the Israelites have brought the ark to the battlefield, they are dismayed:

The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp [of the Israelite soldiers]!" They said, "Woe unto us! for nothing like this has ever happened before! Woe unto us! Who can save us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck down the Egyptians with all sorts of plagues in the wilderness!"

(1 Samuel 4.7–8)

The Philistines understand the ark in the same way that Zion-Sabaoth texts and Numbers 10.35 do: It somehow houses divinity (perhaps inside rather than on top of the ark), and its arrival on the battlefield means the arrival of Israel's God on the battlefield. The ark is essentially a doomsday weapon against which mortals cannot expect to stand. Now, it is clear that the narrator does not intend to compliment the Zion-Sabaoth theology by putting it into the mouths of the Philistines. In case we missed the point that the Philistines' understanding of Yhwhstic theology leaves something to be desired, the narrative has them refer in verse 8 not to the Israelite God but the Israelite gods (מִי יִצִילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים) (האדירים האלה אלה הם האלהים המכים את מצרים). The Hebrew phrasing in this verse repeatedly uses plural adjectives and verbs, as if to make sure we don't miss the joke. (The Septuagint translation uses a plural verb in the Philistines' statement in verse 7 as well ["Gods have come into the camp" rather than MT's "God has come..."], and this reading may preserve an older form of the text.) The Philistines' grasp of the fine points of Israelite history is not much better. They believe that the Israelite gods performed plagues against the Egyptians in the wilderness, apparently confusing the wonders that allowed the Israelites to escape from Egypt with the miracles Yhwh wrought for them during their forty years of wandering through the Sinai desert on their way to Canaan.⁸⁴

It is not only the Philistine characters who express the belief that God is present in the ark. After the Philistines capture the ark and kill the two sons of the aged priest Eli, an Israelite runner comes back to Shiloh with the report of the battle. Eli bears with fortitude the news of the Israelites' defeat and his two son's death, but on hearing the fate of the ark, he falls backward off his seat, breaks his neck, and dies. The news then sends the pregnant wife (rather, widow) of Eli's son Phinehas into labor. She, too, dies, after giving birth, but not before she names her son: "She called the child 'Ikabod,' saying 'The *kabod* has gone into exile from Israel' – referring to the capture of the ark of God, and to her father-in-law and her husband" (1 Samuel 4.21). One can wonder: In giving her child a name that means "There is no *kabod*" or "Where is the *kabod*?" what sense of the Hebrew word does she intend: "honor" or "divine body"? Does she mean that with the loss of the precious object and the near elimination of Israel's leading family, her nation has lost all its dignity? Or that God Himself has left Israel to become a captive of the enemy?

Two biblical scholars, Patrick Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, identify multiple similarities between the ark narrative in Samuel and several ancient Mesopotamian accounts of the capture of a divine statue or *šalmu* by foreign invaders and its eventual return.⁸⁵ In light of these parallels, it seems most likely that the exile this character mentions involves not just an abstract idea but something concrete. She speaks of the very presence of her nation's God. Further, it would be appropriate for Phinehas's wife and Eli's daughter-in-law to use the term *kabod* in the sense it carries

in priestly theology. Theirs, after all, was a leading priestly family.⁸⁶ Eli and his sons served at what was then Israel's central shrine, and they carry typical priestly names (Phinehas, for example, is also the name of Aaron's grandson and successor in Numbers 25.10–13, as well as the name of a priest in Ezra 8.33). Significantly, they were the priests of Shiloh, which many scholars regard as the original home of the priestly traditions known from the Pentateuch.⁸⁷ The presence of the term *kabod* in the mouth of a character who belongs to this family is suggestive. Phinehas's widow, we might say, has every right to use the term in its classical priestly sense – or, to speak more precisely, a Deuteronomistic narrator has every reason to use her as a representative of *kabod* theology. Here again, the narrator associates the notion of real presence with a particular character, and that association undermines the notion. The early chapters of 1 Samuel present a cutting indictment of the family of Eli. The narrator presents Eli as feckless, bumbling, and timorous when zeal is called for; further, his family loses its priestly office forever as a result of the sins his two sons commit while discharging the responsibilities of their office (see 1 Samuel 2.11–17, 22–36; 3.11–14). In short, for our Deuteronomistic narrator, the Zion-Sabaoth or *kabod* theology is the theology of a hated enemy and of a corrupt and discredited priestly house. The endorsements our Deuteronomistic editors provide for this theology do little to advance its cause in the debate.

As if to focus our attention on Mrs. Phinehas's use of the term *kabod* in 4.21, the narrative repeatedly uses the Hebrew root כבד, from which the term derives: The root appears in 4.18, 5.6, 5.11, 6.5, and twice in 6.6. The term represents what scholars call a “leading word.”⁸⁸ Such terms in biblical narrative call attention to a central idea, and the contrasts between the various uses of a term are often a key to interpreting the text.⁸⁹ The ark narrative consistently employs the root כבד to convey the idea of heaviness and severity. With the exception of its appearance in the mouth of Phinehas's widow in 4.21, the root does not carry the loaded theological sense it has in priestly texts. These repetitions, then, comment on the dying mother's use of the term in 4.21: Regardless of her intentions, we ought to understand the verse to refer to Israel losing its honor, not to God going physically into exile.

A third group of characters also seems to be associated with Zion-Sabaoth theology: the unnamed Israelite elders who call for the ark to be brought to the battlefield when the battle was going against the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4.3: “The Israelite elders said, ‘Why has Yhwh defeated us today before the Philistines? Let's get ourselves⁹⁰ the ark of the covenant of Yhwh from Shiloh, so that, going in our midst, it can save us from the hand of our enemies!’” The view these elders express resembles the doctrine of the inviolability of Zion. Just as the presence of Yhwh of Hosts on the cherubim above the ark would one day protect Jerusalem according to the doctrine of Zion's inviolability, so too in the eyes of the elders Yhwh's presence in or on the ark guarantees victory. But the

narrative goes on to eviscerate this theology. As the biblicist Shimon Bar-Efrat puts it,

Israel's defeat results from God's will, and even the presence of the holiest cultic item on the battlefield cannot promise victory. The ark has no intrinsic value; rather, it is only a symbol of God's presence. Yhwh utilizes the appearance of the ark on the battlefield for His own purpose, and the ark does not lead to the expected result, but rather to the one God desires.⁹¹

This chapter, then, attacks not only Zion-Sabaoth theology but also the doctrine of Zion's inviolability. In this regard the ark narrative in 1 Samuel resembles Jeremiah 7. That chapter, which is part of the deuteronomic stratum within the Book of Jeremiah, attributes to Jeremiah a speech spoken outside the Jerusalem temple in which the prophet delivers a blistering attack on the notion that the temple somehow protects a sinful nation. Jeremiah directs his listeners to look toward the Israelite town of Shiloh, north of Jerusalem; the ark was once located there, but that did not prevent Shiloh and its sanctuary from destruction (Jeremiah 7.12). The link between the ark narrative in Samuel and Jeremiah's repudiation of *kabod* theology is deeply appropriate. Jeremiah was a direct descendant of Eli and Phinehas through Ikabod's older brother Ahitub.⁹² What Jeremiah denounces is his own family's earlier theology, which did not save them from loss of office but brought about their downfall.

If it ended at the close of [chapter 4](#), the ark narrative might have been taken as a complete rejection of the notion that the ark is anything more than a box with several important texts inside it. But the story goes on to describe the extraordinary events at the temple of Dagon, the plague affecting the residents of the Philistine cities in which the ark sojourned, its miraculous return in a cart pulled by cows without any human guidance, the death in Beth Shemesh of the Israelites who dared to look into it, and finally the death of Uzzah, who tried to save it from falling when David brought it to Jerusalem. Even though 1 Samuel 4 mocks the idea that God is really in the ark or on it, the narrative goes on to show that the ark is mysteriously powerful. How can one account for the narrative's dual presentation of the ark?

The unfortunate experiences of the Philistines in [chapter 5](#) allow a straightforward explanation from within the Deuteronomists' point of view. What happens to the Philistines and their god Dagon does not show that God is physically present at the ark. Rather, having allowed the ark to be captured (in order to punish the Israelites), Yhwh needs to demonstrate His might in Philistia.⁹³ Yhwh used the Philistines to punish the corrupt sons of Eli and perhaps also to demonstrate that the ark does not automatically bring victory. Having done so, Yhwh then forced the Philistines to return the ark in order to prevent any misunderstanding about His relative position in relation to Dagon.

Yet the mystery persists beyond the sections of the narrative pertaining to the Philistines and their god. As Robert Alter notes, "Throughout the Ark narrative,

including what may be its epilogue in 2 Samuel 6, runs an archaic sense of God's sacred objects as material precipitates of an awesome and dangerous power."⁹⁴ In other words, even though the ark narrative's **first chapter** polemicizes against the notion that the ark literally houses divinity, later chapters seem to lend credence to such a theory. This tension, of course, may simply result from the text's literary history. The original ark narrative may have reflected Zion-Sabaoth theology or something quite similar to priestly *kabod* theology. Indeed, Rost, the scholar who first put forth the hypothesis that the ark narrative was originally a separate document, maintains that it was composed by the priestly family of Kiryat Ye⁶arim; he notes that the only named characters in the ark narrative are priests and, in its final segment, King David, and he furthermore points out that it shares phraseology with both the P document and with many psalms, which were recited, copied, and stored in Israelite temples.⁹⁵ If this is the case, the tensions in the final form of the text may reflect its two layers: an original text that was close to priestly theology (though not quite a P text) and a later reworking by Deuteronomistic editors who opposed that theology. The Deuteronomistic editors front-loaded their critique without completely reworking the whole. The front-loaded critique provides the context in which to understand the miracles that follow. We should not think that the ark or some divine presence within it wrought the miracles; rather, they were the will of a sovereign God who does as He pleases, afflicting Philistine and Israelite alike. Owning the ark is not the equivalent of owning God. So that the Israelites learn this lesson, they not only have to lose the ark in battle, but on recovering it they must be stricken again. As Miller and Roberts put it, "Upon the return of the ark at the end of the narrative, the ark and the power of Yhwh may not be taken for granted any more than it could be at the beginning, in the battle of Ebenezer."⁹⁶

AMBIVALENCE IN THE ANTIFLUIDITY TRADITIONS

We can note a lingering sense of the ark's awesome power in the final form of the ark narrative in the Books of Samuel. The Deuteronomistic editors attempt to deflate the ark's pretensions while continuing to maintain that it is not just any box. The ambivalence evident in Dtr's portrayal of the ark recalls the duality in D's attitude toward the uniquely chosen but not quite holy city of Jerusalem. This ambivalence further recalls the tension we noted earlier in P's attitude toward the sacred center. Both of these antifluidity traditions, the priestly and the deuteronomistic, espouse theologies concerning the unified, indivisible divine body that lend themselves to a locative or centripetal view of the universe. Yet D tempers its locative stance by informing us that God really is not in the center in any event, and P undermines it by portraying the center as mobile without acknowledging that the center would one day come to rest. Here I must beg my reader not to misunderstand me: Both P and D are clearly locative texts. Neither one jettisons the notion that the place has religious value or the idea that one particular place

has more religious value than all others.⁹⁷ On the contrary, both texts contain laws that require us to accept such notions, along with narratives (in P) or sermons (in D) that encourage us to embrace these ideas. Yet both also prompt us to regard these notions with suspicion.

To delve further into this ambivalence, it will be useful to examine P's narrative of the dedication of the tabernacle, for it is in describing that event that P most clearly lays bare the complicated nature of its understanding of sacred space. Doing so will require attention not only to the notion of privileged geography but also to the concept of foundational moments. That examination follows.



God's Bodies and Sacred Space (2): Difficult Beginnings

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, WE NOTED A CORRELATION BETWEEN A tradition's understanding of divine embodiment and its attitudes toward sacred space. The tent of meeting found in the E strand of the Pentateuch, which is one of the fluidity traditions, embraces an attitude toward sacred space that celebrates what the theorist of religion J. Z. Smith calls the peripheral or the centrifugal: There is no one sacred center, so that the sacred can manifest itself some distance from the center of the Israelite camp. For E, Yhwh can have multiple bodies, and therefore no single location can claim a monopoly on the sacred. The stances of P and D were more complex. Each one endorses the notion of a sacred center, but each one also deflates or undermines that notion. The sacred center in P was not limited to a fixed location, but, in the form of the tabernacle, was mobile. Thus P displayed not what Smith terms a locative stance but what I call a locomotive one: There is a single sacred center, but it moves. By linking the tabernacle, a symbol or predecessor of the Jerusalem temple, with a nomadic tent that belongs to no one place, the priestly document moves in two opposing directions, toward the center and toward the periphery, and thus it opens the door for a critique of its own theology of presence.

The duality of P's concept of centrality prompts the question: Does P's description of the tent, which is often understood as the classical expression of divine immanence in the Hebrew Bible, mask anxieties concerning divine absence? Does it hint at doubts regarding the constancy of divine presence? A positive answer to this question emerges from the account of the tabernacle's dedication in the opening chapters of Leviticus. A full understanding of this famously enigmatic story becomes possible when we compare it to a number of JE stories that touch on similar themes and help flesh out the fluidity traditions' attitudes toward sacred space. We shall see that the attitudes of these various texts toward the idea of sacred space become evident again and again in narratives of beginning, because notions of privileged place correlate closely with attitudes toward foundational moments.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

Throughout the Pentateuch, stories that recount beginnings – of the world, of the nation Israel, and of its sacred worship – allude to the theme of sacred or privileged

space. Narratives describing crucial moments in time repeatedly implicate or interrogate the notion that there are crucial locations in space. Further, these narratives consistently describe occasions of beginning as fraught with difficulties and ambiguities. In the Pentateuch, to initiate is to expatriate, to lose one's place, and even to die. (Thus these narratives support the contention of a midrash to the Book of Exodus that informs us, כל תחילת קשות – "All beginnings are hard."¹) The recurrent association of beginnings with exile and disaster calls out for explanation. This nexus should not be labeled as a reaction to a specific historical exile. Rather, it reflects a religious mentality that is both attracted to and troubled by the idea that God and Israel belong in a particular sacred space. The Pentateuch's emphasis on exile at moments of foundation discloses a tension between two constructions of divine presence, one locative and one utopian, which the Pentateuch insists on juxtaposing. These constructions supplement each other in the sense of the term used by modern literary critics: Each complements and contradicts the other.² As a result, the Pentateuch unceasingly defers any resolution to the tension it presents. This pattern is true in priestly narratives, which contend that God has just one body worshipped in one place, and also in the JE texts, which reflect the ancient Near Eastern notion that a divinity can have multiple bodies, each one the home of a sacrificial cult.

THE DEDICATION OF THE TABERNACLE IN PRIESTLY LITERATURE

The first narrative of beginnings we examine comes from the lengthy set of texts describing the tabernacle or tent of meeting in P. The story of its dedication, and hence of the inauguration of the sacrificial cult, is P's central text of beginning, because for priestly authors these events (described in Exodus 40–Leviticus 10) represent the high point in the history of Israel and, moreover, of the world.³ For the P writers, no other episode carries such weight or demands similar respect. The Exodus for them was merely a step toward the worship at the altar. (God did not say to Pharaoh, "Let My people go, because freedom is a good thing," but "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me" [Exodus 7.16 et al.], and "serve" refers to sacrificial service, as Exodus 5.1 and 8.25 make clear.⁴) Redemption from slavery bore little value on its own to the priests, who did not find the notion of Israel's slavery inherently bothersome. They were, however, concerned with this question: Whom do the slaves serve, and how? "It is to Me that the children of Israel are slaves; they are My slaves, those people whom I led out of Egypt," P's God insists (Leviticus 25.55), and that exalted slavery consummates itself in the cult at the tabernacle.⁵ Even the revelation at Sinai was not, for P, the central milestone of Israel's history (and in this respect P differs from the other Pentateuchal sources).⁶ According to P, God alighted on Mount Sinai only in order to demonstrate that Moses was his prophet and to vouchsafe Moses a vision detailing the design of the tabernacle. After briefly doing so, God waited atop the mountain for ten months

until the tabernacle was built, entered it, and only then began the revelation of the law.⁷

From Mount Sinai, P's God neither spoke nor thundered. The mountain was merely a station for the divine presence on its way to its destination beyond the altar in the holy of holies, and thus the event that transpired at Mount Sinai in the third month after the Exodus held no intrinsic significance. Far more consequential transactions took place at the brand-new tabernacle during the first eight days of the people's second year in the wilderness: God dictated the laws to Moses, Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons as priests, and the priests burned the first offerings. These eight days of dedication, described in Exodus 40–Leviticus 10, represent Israel's true beginning. For P, the Israelites became a nation, truly deserved the name Israel, only when God arrived in their midst and they responded accordingly—that is, when the tabernacle was complete and they initiated their worship. From P's first mention of Abraham in Genesis 11 through the Sinai event at Exodus 19 and following, P conceives of Israel as a nation in latent form, but with the dedication Israel moves from promise to reality.⁸

We can go one step further. The events at the beginning of the first month of the second year represent the culmination of creation, for until then the world had been incomplete. P's narrative in Genesis 1.1–2.4a is in many respects a classic ancient Near Eastern creation account, sharing with its Mesopotamian counterparts several features of plot and style.⁹ But the apogee of creation in several ancient Near Eastern creation myths was the construction of the high god's temple, and this is notably lacking in Genesis 1. That absence is remedied in Exodus 39–40 with the dedication of the tabernacle. (Significantly, Genesis 1.1–2.4a and Exodus 39–40 are linked by extensive verbal parallels; for example the confluence in both of the terms “complete” [וְכִלָּה, Genesis 2.1 and Exodus 39.32], “saw all He/they made” [וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, Genesis 1.31 and Exodus 39.43], “work” [מְלָאכָה, Genesis 2.2–3, Exodus 39.43], “bless” [וַיְבָרֵךְ, Genesis 2.3 and Exodus 39.43], and “consecrate” [קָדַשׁ, Genesis 2.3 and Exodus 40.9–13].)¹⁰ The parallels indicate that Genesis 1.1–2.4a and Exodus 39–40 are the bookends of a single narrative whose topic is not just the creation of the world but the entrance of the transcendent God into the world that God created.¹¹ Thus the complex of ceremonies in which the tabernacle was first put to use constitutes the inaugural ceremonies for the world itself,¹² or at least for the world as a place worth noting, because only then did the divine glory settle on earth, and only then could humans respond fully to God's presence.¹³

It is all the more surprising, then, that this profoundly central occasion,¹⁴ for which Israel had prepared intensively over a period of ten months and for whose purpose God had created the world, culminated in disaster. The ceremonies began as momentously as one would expect. The divine presence entered the tabernacle (Exodus 40.17–35) and spoke to Moses, imparting the rules of sacrifice (Leviticus 1–7). Moses invested Aaron and his sons as priests in a week-long rite (Leviticus 8).

Then, finally, the goal of the lawgiving, of the Exodus, and of creation itself, could be realized. With an ordained priesthood working according to revealed instructions at a properly erected and duly consecrated tabernacle, the sacrificial services began. On the eighth day, Aaron presented the first offerings, whereupon Yhwh's fiery *kabod* appeared and consumed them (Leviticus 9). When Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, stepped forward to offer an additional sacrifice, again a divine fire came forth. But it incinerated not the offerings but the two young priests themselves (Leviticus 10).

The death of Nadab and Abihu was not just a shock for the newly formed nation, nor was it merely a tragedy for the family of Moses and Aaron. It was an event of cosmic scope, for such a surprising calamity on the most auspicious day of Israel's (and the world's) history cast a giant shadow on the generations of service that were to follow. Furthermore, these first sacrifices were incomplete. The priests themselves were supposed to eat parts of them, but they never did so. Nadab and Abihu died before they could eat their share, and the remaining priests regarded it as inappropriate to partake of the sacrifices after their brethren's death (10.16–20). Thus the beginning of sacrificial worship was flawed from a legal point of view – and for P, such a flaw is formidable. Moses, and presumably God, acquiesce to this flaw in 10.20, but the irony of the first service's cultic defect remains noteworthy.¹⁵

If the Hebrew Bible has anything resembling a notion of Original Sin, or at least Original Catastrophe, it is located at the debut of Yhwh's worship.¹⁶ Why did the ultimate Good Thing begin so badly? Ancient, medieval, and modern commentators have proffered a host of explanations for the death of Aaron's sons. These contradictory readings are equally convincing (and thus at some level unpersuasive) because of the severely enigmatic nature of Leviticus 10, whose terse sentences and litany of unmotivated actions have baffled readers for millennia.¹⁷ I would like to approach this question from a different angle, by recognizing that the death of Nadab and Abihu is an account of origins. It will be useful to examine other stories of origins in the Pentateuch before returning to Leviticus 10, and so to the JE narratives of Israel's and the world's beginnings we now turn.

HOME AND EXILE IN JE STORIES OF ORIGIN

JE texts that describe origins exhibit a striking pattern: All beginnings entail exile. This pattern presents itself in the JE texts dealing with the origins of humanity (Genesis 2–4), with the introduction of Israel's first ancestor (Genesis 12), and with the early life of Israel's liberator and lawgiver (Exodus 2). Note how often, for example, the words גרש (“expel”) and שלח (“send away”) appear in these three, very brief, texts (Genesis 3.23, 3.24, 4.14, 12.20; Exodus 2.17, and cf. the name גרשם [Gershom], in 2.22). Moreover, although the theme of exile is unambiguously present in all three of these narratives, the identification of the nature and location

of exile in each is indeterminate. The exile into which characters move is always in some way a nonexile, and the home from which they come is always less than a home.

Exile is most obvious, and most obscure, in J's story of Adam and Eve. Yhwh creates two human beings, whom He places in paradise, but they sin by eating fruit forbidden to them, and therefore they and their descendants are forced to leave it for the fallen world we know. The world itself, then, is a form of exile. Or is it? As various scholars have noted, one can question whether this text really describes sin, punishment, and fall.¹⁸ The Hebrew language has many words for "sin" and "disobedience," and biblical narrators are ordinarily quick to use them. But none of these words appears in Genesis 3.¹⁹ Indeed, one can argue that Adam and Eve could not truly sin, and thus incur punishment, while they were in the Garden. At that point, they could not distinguish between right and wrong, because they had not yet eaten from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" mentioned in 2.15.²⁰ Concerns such as these suggest that the penalty described in Genesis 3.14–24 may not be deserved or may not be a penalty at all.

In this case, one may wonder whether the banishment is really a banishment. Several factors suggest that Adam and Eve always belonged outside Eden, which was in fact a place of exile or, at least, limbo for them. Although God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it and guard it (2.15), He had created Adam for a different purpose: "to work the soil [or earth – in Hebrew, *ha'adamah*])" (2.5). This goal is not met until he is expelled: "Yhwh who is God sent him away from the Garden of Eden to *work the soil* from which he had been taken" (3.23). Thus the expulsion was in fact a homecoming, as well as the fulfillment of the original divine plan. By the end of [chapter 3](#), Adam is located on the soil where he always was intended to be. His tenure at Eden was a detour from which he had to find his way back. Similarly, Eve receives her name – which is to say, in the idiom of ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, becomes a fully existent being²¹ – only after she has eaten the fruit and God has announced His response: "Then the Adam named his wife Eve/Life (חַוָּה), for she was the mother of all life (יָחַי)" (3.20).²² The wording of this verse returns us to the pre-Eden situation of 2.7, when humanity was first created: "Yhwh who is God used dust from the soil to create the Adam, and He blew the breath of life (רוּחַ חַיִּים) into his nostrils, and he became a living (חַיִּים) being." Both 2.7 and 3.20 locate life outside Eden. Adam became a living being before he was placed there, and Eve, only after they left.

These considerations force a reevaluation of how we understand the narrative structure of Genesis 2–3. Although these chapters are often understood to move from creation to fall, David Jobling argues that another narrative pattern also appears in our text.²³ This alternative involves not banishment (which involves the creation of a deficiency), but return or recovery (which involves the alleviation of a deficiency). Genesis 2.4b–6 describe a lack: There is no human to work the soil. In 2.7, the human is created on the soil, but in 2.8 he is spirited away to

Eden. Aided by the serpent and his wife, he reaches the non-Edenic soil again, and the original lack is finally filled. The narrative as Jobling understands it is a classic folktale, describing a journey and a homecoming. Such folktales have been analyzed by V. Propp and A. J. Greimas, who find they are built from specific narrative elements and character types, or “functions.”²⁴ In Genesis 2–3 these functions are manipulated in surprising ways. The Helpers (the true heroes of the story) are the serpent and Eve; the Object is Adam; the Receiver is the soil. The Sender and the Opponent are the same character, Yhwh.²⁵ (The merging of these contradictory functions is highly unusual for a folktale, but not for the Hebrew Bible.²⁶) As is typical for this sort of tale, the homecoming at the end of [chapter 3](#) is followed by the consummation of the marriage in 4.1.²⁷

Thus, Jobling shows, there are two competing narrative structures in Genesis 2–3. A mythical pattern moves from a positive “before” (Eden) to a negative “after” (the fallen world); this might be described as the familiar “creation and fall” pattern of the Eden story. However, as a folktale, the story moves from order (pre-Edenic creation: man is in the proper place) through disorder (Eden: man is in the wrong place) to a reestablished order²⁸; this might be described as the “homecoming” pattern. Although Jobling views the former pattern as dominant, the latter exposes the former’s incoherence, because so many elements of “after” appear in the world of “before” (for example, the serpent, the woman, and the tree of knowledge belong to the logic of “after,” but are already present in Eden).²⁹ Some critics might agree that the two patterns are in juxtaposition without seeing one as dominant and the second as subversive; such a reader will simply acknowledge a tension between positive and negative evaluations of the world, knowledge, sexuality, and work.³⁰ Other readers go further than Jobling, denying that the mythic notion of fall occurs at all.³¹

Even if one wishes to deny that a fall occurs, one cannot avoid the language of expulsion in 3.23–24.³² The serpent, who is the main instigator of the movement out of paradise, is cursed (3.14), and Adam and Eve are subjected to harsh language if not an explicit malediction (3.16–20). All this reinforces the conclusion that Eden was humanity’s original home whereas the non-Edenic earth is an exile. But the text repeatedly undermines this conclusion with its suggestions that Eden was merely the place through which humanity had to journey on its way home. We have seen that humanity is connected with the word “life” only outside Eden. Only in 3.23, as he leaves Eden, does Adam truly become Adam, a being of the earth (Hebrew, *’adamah*) that he was created to work; only in 3.23 does Eve (Hebrew, *ḥawwah*) reach the pre-Edenic level of a living being (*ḥayyah*). Within Eden, Adam and Eve are only potentially viable and not their true selves. A rigid structuralist might argue that in Eden they are dead. Paradise is a womb or a tomb, but it is not a place to live.³³ This ambivalent narrative entangles notions of exile and home. Genesis 2–3 set up a dichotomy even as it frustrates our ability to decide which polarity is which. The story of humanity’s origins is a story of movement, but it is

difficult to establish whether this movement goes from the center to the periphery, the other way around, or both.³⁴

Polarities beset by complications also appear in Genesis 12, which is another story of origins (this time, of the Israelite people). Yhwh suddenly and inexplicably appears to someone named Abram³⁵ and tells him to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house to go to a place that Yhwh will reveal; in short, Yhwh orders Abram into exile (12.1). When he arrives in Canaan – a land that, the text reminds us, already has its own population (12.6) – Yhwh announces that this land will belong to Abram's descendants, whereupon Abram builds an altar (12.7). Abram's exile, then, turns out not to be an exile at all, because he is in his own land or at least his progeny's land. Yet the pendulum continues to swing. Upon informing us that Abram is in his divinely appointed land, the text immediately records his transience: He does not settle down, but roves farther and farther south (12.8–9). Ultimately (and in terms of textual time, almost immediately after his arrival), he leaves for Egypt because of a famine (12.10). The wording emphasizes that this, too, is not Abram's home, for he goes to Egypt merely “to dwell there temporarily” (לגור שם).³⁶ Nonetheless, he is received there with honor by the land's ruler, and thus for the first time, Abram seems more or less firmly connected to a place. But this connection does not last long, for Pharaoh realizes he is being cursed on Abram's account, and he expels him from Egypt (12.20). In short: God compels Abram to leave a homeland that in retrospect turns out to have been an exile; he arrives in an exile and learns that this place is to be his homeland; forthwith he goes into exile from that new homeland, only to be exiled back to his new homeland/exile. All this from the first text that describes the relationship between the nation Israel and its land. Here again, our JE narrative confronts us with the theme of home and exile while aggressively challenging our ability to figure out which is which.

The multiple layers of exile, exile from exile, and home that is not home are even more tangled in the story of Moses' origins – which, by extension, are another story of Israel's beginnings, for under Moses (in JE as in P) Israel becomes a nation. Moses is born in exile as an Israelite in Egypt. Further, the slavery into which he is born can itself be understood as a form of exile, as can the death sentence Pharaoh promulgated against him as an Israelite male. He is immediately sent away from his exilic home to float on the Nile in a basket in Exodus 2.3. This verse recalls the Noah story, for the term used for the basket there actually means “ark” (תבה), and it is sealed with “pitch” (זפת), which recalls the similar material, גפר, used by Noah to seal the ark in Genesis 6.14; note the semantic parallel between these terms in Isaiah 34.9). Consequently, the Nile is linked with the primordial waters of the Noah story. To leave exile, then, does not necessarily mean to return home: The newborn Moses moves from exile to chaos, from a place that is not here to a place that is neither here nor there. In the Hebrew Bible, primordial waters, like the desert, are neither exile nor homeland, but constitute a third category. Desert and ocean (and, via allusion, the Nile in our passage) are places of creative chaos, of becoming

rather than belonging.³⁷ As we have seen, Eden functions in quite the same way in Genesis 2–3: It is a place through which Adam and Eve had to travel on their way to their home in precisely the same way that Israel must travel through the desert to arrive in its homeland.

Moses' journeys are far from over. Pharaoh's daughter draws him out of the Nile and brings him to her father's house. He finally has a home,³⁸ but this home is also an exile. Displaced from his own family, Moses is now banished not only geographically but also culturally. Moreover, Moses' new double homelessness entails a vicious irony, which complicates this complicated schema even more. For Moses' new home away from home away from home is the palace of his family's oppressor.

The sense that Moses lacks any topos of his own becomes even more pronounced in Exodus 2.11–15, the first verses in which he appears as an actor rather than as a passive object. After coming to the aid of one of his Israelite (crypto-)brethren against one of his Egyptian (pseudo-)brethren, he is rejected by both Israelites and Egyptians. He flees from Egypt to the desert (once again, he moves from exile to chaos). His first experience there is remarkably fitting in light of his peculiar nature. He witnesses several shepherds expelling (Hebrew root: גר'ש) young women from a well (2.17). The refugee from Egypt marries one of those women, further associating himself with a trope of expulsion. They have a son to whom Moses gives the pregnant designation "Gershom" in 2.22. The name echoes the root גר'ש (*g-r-sh*) and thus points to the dominant motif associated with this man, who was cast away from his own family as an infant and from his adopted family as a young man, and who married a nomadic woman who was cast away from a well.³⁹ Our text, however, does not explicitly relate the name to the root גר'ש, but understands it to consist of two other elements, the words גר ("stranger" – Hebrew, *geir*) and שם ("there" – *sham*). Moses explains his choice by saying, "I was a stranger (גר) in a foreign land." We should pause to wonder: Where is "there" – that is, what is the foreign land to which Moses refers? Most readers understand "there" as a reference to his new location, because Moses is not a native of Midian.⁴⁰ But the name could just as well refer to Moses' experiences in Egypt.⁴¹ The perfective verb, הייתי – "I was" – hints that Moses has the past in mind as much as the present. There too he was a stranger among foreigners – when he was born, when he grew up in Pharaoh's house, and when he made his abortive salvo back into Israelite society.

The short chapter that introduces Israel's prototypical leader presents him as a utopian figure, in the original sense of the word: He has no place. One might have expected that the liberator who guides Israel toward its land would be associated with tropes of location and of center. Instead, he is aligned with exile (even more intensely than all the other Israelites, for they experienced only a single, simple exile) and with places that are not places at all (the waters of the Nile and the desert). Significantly, the founder of Israel will establish the nation's religion by receiving the law in the desert, and he will never set foot in the promised land.

Why do JE texts describing origins focus on exile and homecoming in such a consistently tangled manner? The facile historicist answer would be to posit an exilic setting for the composition of these stories or to recall that the Torah was redacted in the exilic or postexilic period.⁴² But this answer is not satisfying even from within a historicist framework. Although it is impossible to date the JE narratives' composition (the oft-cited Solomonic origin of J is based on notoriously flimsy reasoning), the complete absence of Late Biblical Hebrew in both J and E rules out the possibility that they stem from the exilic or postexilic period.⁴³ (Even the Book of Ezekiel, most of which was composed at the beginning of the exile, already shows features of Late Biblical Hebrew.⁴⁴) Nor can one point to the work of late redactors; if anything, the prominence of the theme of exile has been softened by the redactors' decision to place the priestly creation account before the story of Adam and Eve. Further, there is no reason that the theme of exile needs to be seen as a product of the exilic or postexilic era. Anxieties regarding the possibility of exile had been present in ancient Israel even before 586 B.C.E. Israelite thinkers had long warned that God might punish the nation for covenantal infraction by taking back the land He had given them. This worry became acute when the Assyrian empire initiated a policy of deporting conquered peoples in the eighth century.⁴⁵ The Assyrians emphasized this threat in the political propaganda they actively exported to other nations, and it is clear that Judean scribes and intellectuals were deeply familiar with this propaganda, as Peter Machinist brilliantly demonstrates.⁴⁶ Thus a more sophisticated historicist might still endeavor to detect a historical rationale in the foregrounding of exile we find in the preexilic J source, at least if one is reasonably sure that these texts were composed after the rise of Assyrian imperialism. But even this better informed reduction of the narratives' concerns hardly does justice to their complexity. The proposal that these texts present a response to specific geopolitical events fails to account for their intricate – one is tempted to say, recursive – conception of exile. Further, biblical texts that respond to the looming threat or recent reality of deportation consistently emphasize punishment and speak of armies sent from afar: One thinks of the covenantal curses in Leviticus (e.g., 26.32) and Deuteronomy (28.25–26) as well as prophetic texts as early as Hosea (e.g., 8.13, 9.3, 11.9)⁴⁷ or as late as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah (e.g., Isa 63.18). The theme of displacement in our JE texts is of a different sort altogether. Genesis 12 and Exodus 2 do not link exile with punishment. In Genesis 3, we can question whether the expulsion from Eden is to be evaluated negatively and whether Adam and Eve had knowingly committed a crime. None of these stories hint at the role of foreign invaders. The concern these texts display is not to be accounted for on a strictly historical or political plane.

LOCATIVE AND UTOPIAN RELIGIOUS VISIONS IN JE

Rather, we should seek an explanation for these strange narratives in JE's attitudes toward time and place. In the previous chapter, we saw that J. Z. Smith revises

Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space by describing two types of culture.⁴⁸ A locative or centripetal⁴⁹ view of the universe celebrates moments of origin and locations in which the divine manifests itself. In this worldview, sacred places serve as the *axis mundi* connecting heaven and earth, and sacred times re-create, imitate, or acknowledge a moment of origin. The locative mentality associates itself with the idea of divine immanence, for it is based on the conviction that the divine irrupts into specific places and at specific times. The utopian or centrifugal view emphasizes not the center but the periphery, for no place fully comprehends the divine. This second worldview recognizes the religious value of reversal, liminality, and chaos. It does not privilege the primeval or moments of origins.

The locative view is known within J itself (see Genesis 28.10–22, esp. 28.17),⁵⁰ but the JE texts that we have examined in this chapter call to mind the utopian outlook. They challenge the notion of a sacred center not so much by valorizing the periphery as by confusing our understanding of where the center is located to begin with. In a locative worldview, one would expect that Eden, a site of creation, might have been consecrated. In other words, one would expect Eden to be identified, at least mythopoeically, with Jerusalem. (The various places from which land spread forth to form the earth *in illo tempore* in Egyptian mythology, for example, become temples in historical time.⁵¹) Similarly, one would expect Abram, on arriving in Canaan, to hurry to the future site of the temple. In some late biblical and postbiblical texts, such linkages do occur.⁵² But in JE, they are absent or at best implied.⁵³ For these JE texts of origins, the *axis mundi* becomes a “wobbling pivot”⁵⁴: Exile may be home, home may be exile, and even from a place that is undisputedly exilic one can descend into a more distant exile or, in any event, what appears to be a more distant exile. JE evinces an ambivalent attitude toward the notions of sacred center and sacred land⁵⁵ precisely where we first encounter them. This is not to say JE rejects these notions. After all, Yhwh does not tell Abram to wander eternally or to live in a permanent exile; rather, He directs him to a specific country. Moses' job is to lead the Israelites to that same land. Eden is described in what at least appear to be glowing terms of plenty and ease. In short, these texts at once valorize and undermine the notion of central place. The same ambivalence is evident in P's main narrative of beginnings, to which we can now return.

LOCATIVE AND UTOPIAN VISIONS IN P'S NARRATIVE OF ORIGINS

The eight-day dedication of the tabernacle should have been an outstanding celebration of a locative ideology. After all, the centrality of P's tabernacle appears indisputable. Located in the exact middle of the Israelite camp (as the elaborate map in Numbers 2 makes clear), it housed the ark and its cover, which served as God's footstool and throne respectively.⁵⁶ The tabernacle was the site of a permanently accessible theophany, which took place unceasingly behind the curtains of the holy of holies.⁵⁷ Yet when the Israelites set apart a sacred time to dedicate

this sacred space, disaster ensues. This disaster, I would like to suggest, evinces P's anxiety concerning its own locative stance. The death of Nadab and Abihu may be explained most readily as expressing P's suspicion of its own ideology, an ideology that valorizes origins and highlights centrality. It is worthwhile, then, to address the mystery of Leviticus 10 in light of our reading of JE texts that describe difficult beginnings.

The debates among ancients and moderns alike regarding the young priests' death have raged so furiously precisely because the text appears to leave it unmotivated. One senses that they must have sinned to have been so severely punished, and many commentators do view them as villains and their deaths as a penalty for some misdeed (which they must reconstruct, because it is not specified in the text).⁵⁸ But Leviticus 10 (like Genesis 3) contains no words for sin or for punishment.⁵⁹ On the contrary, as Menahem Haran rightly notes,

It is quite obvious that they had no intention of rebelling against Yhwh. On the contrary, they only intended to pay homage to him, and their error, namely, putting "strange fire" in their censers, was one of ignorance; nevertheless, they immediately perished.⁶⁰

Indeed, as evidence from some early interpreters attests, it is not impossible to view Nadab and Abihu as heroes. As Milgrom points out, in Philo, "Nadab and Abihu are singled out for praise! . . . The fire of v 2 was a sign of divine favor, as in the contiguous passage, 9:24. The fire that consumed them was . . . 'alien to creation, but akin to God.'"⁶¹ Similarly, some rabbinic texts also view Aaron's sons not as perpetrators but as martyrs who expressed their love of God through their deaths.⁶² Yet the text of Leviticus itself is remarkably reticent, reporting their deaths without giving any indication of censure or praise. In light of JE's interrogations of the notion of home in narratives of origin, P's description of an attack on the priests who officiated at the inauguration of God's earthly residence becomes contextualized, if not understandable.

These streams of tradition force their audiences to confront the inappropriate nature of sacred space when they narrate stories that explain the origin of central locations. I would suggest that although they are priests, Aaron's sons do not really belong where they are, just as Adam and Eve, Abram, and Moses did not belong in the place(s) intended for them in texts describing their beginnings. The courtyard outside the tabernacle that stands at the center of the Israelite encampment was the focus of the priests' attention and being; there they serve Yhwh. But this location is not really for them, because the very body of God sits nearby inside the inner sanctum of the tabernacle itself. In this sense, the fire that the two priests offered was "strange" (Hebrew, זָרָה) (Leviticus 10.1). In P, this term simply means that which does not belong, a person who is in a place not intended for him or her.⁶³ By offering a sacrifice that "God had not commanded them," Aaron's sons (regardless of their intentions) uncovered the severely narrow bounds of divine-human contact. Even at the very heart of the sacred enclosure, a "near-coming" (which more accurately

translates the Hebrew term used there for offering) is strange, which is to say, out of place. The strangeness of the fire conveys (or, perhaps, covers up) the strangeness of the act of meeting that takes place at the tent. By priestly mediation, Israelites could attempt to approach God – but only temporarily, according to complex rules, and at the risk of their lives.⁶⁴

The peril involved in approaching the unapproachable is conveyed in Moses' cryptic statement immediately after the disaster (Leviticus 10.3):

Moses said to Aaron: This is what Yhwh has said:

Among those close to Me (בקרבי) I manifest holiness (אקדש),

And in the sight of the whole people I manifest presence (אכבד).

The verb I translate with the words “manifest presence” (which could also be rendered “I display importance” or “I show myself weighty”) comes from the same root that produces the noun *kabod*, intimating that what is at stake in this narrative is the relationship between God's body and the Israelites who reside close to it in the camp surrounding the tent of meeting. In another context (and Moses seems to be quoting a line he knew from another context), this line would seem exuberant. The priests, to whom the words “those close to me” refer, are honored to enjoy direct access to Yhwh without any intermediary,⁶⁵ whereas the whole nation is privileged to witness the manifestation of God. Happy is the nation whose lot is thus; happy, the nation who may dwell at God's house. But in this setting, the line takes on another timbre. To God's greatness there is no limit, and thus the manifestation of God's *kabod* can take any form. In this case, the manifestation takes the form of incineration. This verse points toward the chaotic side of the holy. The erection of the tabernacle is an attempt at domesticating what the theorist of religion Rudolph Otto called the *tremendum*, the overwhelming, dangerous, and repelling aspect of the divine. This attempt at domesticating (that is, providing a home for) the *tremendum* is divinely sanctioned. Yet precisely at the moment in which the domestication of the *kabod* climaxes and specifically among those who have direct access to that divine presence, it becomes brutally clear that holiness cannot be contained.

The laws and narratives of P represent an attempt to mask the inherent incongruity of the tabernacle. By prescribing the proper way to create a home for God, the laws tame Yhwh's uncontainability; by describing the *kabod*'s entrance into the tent, the narrative assures us of God's presence. But the chaos that is that presence intrudes through the camouflage. The cloak of order in which P glories is removed by the desert location of the tabernacle (and here we recall that the desert in the Hebrew Bible is not a place of exile but a place of creative chaos, a place that is “sacred in the wrong way”⁶⁶) and most of all by the disaster that its inauguration became. Moreover, it is not only the priests who are in the wrong place, too close to Yhwh. The God of creation in Genesis 1 stands outside of that creation, and hence the deity's attachment to a particular location is dangerously inappropriate.

Any irruption of divinity in the created world may incorporate an eruption.⁶⁷ Attempts to localize this irruption in one particular spot are dangerous if not doomed, and for this reason the priestly narrative in the Torah portrays God as dwelling in an itinerant tent. In this respect, P's God resembles JE's Adam, Eve, and Abram, for all of them are at once strongly connected to a particular place and yet perpetually wandering. P's God, like JE's Moses, is utopian, even though they both direct the nation toward holy ground. Further, P's tabernacle recalls J's Eden: Each place appears central,⁶⁸ but each is also utopian, a mythic location outside normal human bounds. Each is a spot of divinely ordained order in which one cannot tarry. P's tabernacle and J's Eden both contain a cherub: The *kabod* sits enthroned on two cherubim in the priestly tabernacle (Exodus 25.22, 37.7–9; Numbers 7.89), whereas a cherub guards the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3.24). What lies above or beyond the cherub is off limits. Humans can achieve the honor of coming close to these spots, but humans cannot abide there, lest they perish.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Both the antifluidity tradition in P and the fluidity traditions in JE regard beginnings with deep suspicion.⁶⁹ And both connect this suspicion to a complicated stance toward privileged locations. By no means can we assert that these texts reject the notion of sacred space, but both confound its facticity: JE, by entangling exile and home, and P, by entangling the sacred center's stability with the sort of chaos or disaster that ought to belong to the periphery. In both, what one would expect to be the epitome of equilibrium teeters. The unpredictability of the sacred center in P is already implied by the creation account in Genesis 1, because the divinely ordained temple that should be the pinnacle of creation is held in abeyance until Exodus 40, and even then the sanctuary that constitutes the *axis mundi* does not belong to a single spot. The temporal dislocations described in these narratives of baffling or disastrous beginnings serve as figures for spatial displacement, but always of a limited sort. The utopian or locomotive models are constantly intertwined with an emphatically locative worldview. Home is not simply the opposite of exile but its *supplement*, in the dual sense of the word as used by Jacques Derrida. Home is *appended* to exile, for Adam, Abraham, Moses, and the tabernacle itself originate in exile rather than in paradise or in the land of Israel (and thus exile, rather than home, turns out to be original, fundamental, or basic). Because home is appended or attached to exile, it follows that the notions of home and exile coexist. Indeed, one cannot exist without the other. But home also attempts to *supplant* and hence negate exile, even as exile incorporates, or takes the place of (which is to say, becomes), home.

Thus the troubled rhetoric of beginnings in the Torah is a rhetoric of displacement, in several senses. These texts describe the displacement of (the notion of) sacred space and those who belong in it: Home is displaced, or supplemented

by, exile. Divine presence itself is displaced into a ambulatory tent located in a desert, and its arrival at that tent effects a radical displacement of the priesthood and of the orderly universe to which they aspire. At the same time, these texts involve displacement in another sense: The temporal trope of beginnings is displaced onto a spatial axis; troubled beginnings serve as a figure for geographic confusion. It follows, then, that beginnings in the Torah recall divine presence, for the texts we have examined subject beginnings and divine presence to the same turn. Both are constantly deferred, constantly subject to a process of what Derrida calls *espacement*.

The texts we have examined are texts of ongoing deferral in a third sense as well. They disclose a polarity between conflicting structures of divine presence, and as soon as they force us to examine one side of this polarity, they send us to the other, without achieving any synthesis. One of the structures in question presents God as locatable, knowable, and usable (i.e., because God can be approached, God can be placated or even influenced through proper ritual). The other reckons the divine to be uncanny, *unheimlich*, in every sense of these words: unknowable, unhomely (i.e., unattachable to any home), dangerous. One polarity recalls Moses' words in Exodus 33.18, "Oh show me Your body (*kabod*)"; the other recalls God's response in Exodus 33.20, "A human cannot see me and live." It follows, then, that the texts we have examined express a theology of divine presence, an ideology of sacred space, even as they deconstruct it. These texts foreground the notion of expulsion, intimating that it precedes the notion of home against which it is set; indeed, they seem to suggest that expulsion (whether in the form of geographic removal or death) is somehow deeply original, perhaps normal, whereas arrival at the right place must constantly be put off.⁷⁰ The locomotive nature of the tent and the disaster at its dedication suggest that the God who belongs in the tabernacle does not really belong there at all, that His presence is in fact a form of exile.

Here again, the dedication of the tabernacle sends us back to Genesis 1, for insofar as the deity comes into contact with creation (indeed, insofar as the deity creates, which is to say, begins), the divinity expels itself from the divine realm. The trope we have examined here, then, represents a prologue, for the themes at hand will unfold more fully in two postbiblical traditions. One, summarized most pithily in John 1.1,14, relates God's expatriation from heaven to become Jesus: "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word dwelt with God, and the Word was God But the Word became flesh and encamped among us, and we saw his glory, the glory of the only-begotten son of the father, full of grace and truth." For the New Testament authors, the expatriation or self-exile these verses describe voids the need for Pentateuchal law even as it reverses the original disaster of Adam's exile: By becoming a human, God (in the body of a dying Messiah) atoned for all human sin and thus made law unnecessary. The other postbiblical tradition to which I refer reaches its pinnacle in Lurianic kabbalah, which describes the self-estrangement of God at the moment of creation. According to this tradition, parts of the Godhead

were trapped in the physical world when the physical world came into being. Exiled parts of God became embedded in the physical world as isolated divine sparks, hidden in husks (*qelippot*) that surround them. This tradition confers theurgic powers to Pentateuchal law, because it asserts that the observance of Pentateuchal law can help undo the primordial calamity of God's exile in matter, returning the divine sparks to God's self. These two conceptions represent appropriations of a single motif from their shared document of origin (to wit, the Hebrew Bible), because they apprehend beginnings as moments of displacement for both God and human: In the former case, the displacement of God when He becomes flesh in the form of Jesus annuls Adam's sin and ultimately will authorize a return to Eden. In the latter, the displacement of God in the *qelippot* foreshadows Adam's sin and necessitates the giving of the law, which brings salvation not so much to humanity as to God. I finish this chapter, then, with an unresolved beginning. Do these postbiblical traditions preserve the constructive tension (or rather, deconstructive *aporia*) that the Torah insists on maintaining, or do they resolve it?



The Perception of Divinity in Biblical Tradition: Implications and Afterlife

I ATTEMPTED TO UNCOVER IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS TWO SIDES OF A theological debate that took place in ancient Israel. Some biblical authors, embracing a theological intuition common throughout the ancient Near East, maintained that God differs radically from human beings because God's body and self are completely unbounded. For these thinkers, who include the J and E authors of the Pentateuch, God has many bodies, and God's person finds expression in more than one self, even as the underlying unity of the being called Yhwh endures. Other biblical authors, including those of the priestly and deuteronomic schools, completely rejected this conception. Putting greater emphasis on God's unity, they insisted that God has only one body and one self.¹

It was the latter group who shaped the Hebrew Bible as we know it. The priestly authors or their descendants were probably the final editors of the Pentateuch; the superstructure of the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers is identical to the basic framework of the priestly document. Thus it is no coincidence that the priestly ritual code that comprises the Book of Leviticus is located in the center of the Pentateuch or that the priestly account of the dedication of the tabernacle in Leviticus 8–10 occurs at the exact midpoint of the Five Books of Moses. The priestly shaping of the Pentateuch's final form has a profound influence on the way one reads this work as a whole.²

Similarly, the work of the deuteronomic sages covers a large span of the Hebrew Bible, including not only the final book of the Pentateuch but also the history of Israel found in the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Another set of history books, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, retell and extend the narrative presented in Joshua-Kings. These books, too, attest to the dominant position of the deuteronomic and priestly outlooks in the final form of the Hebrew Bible, because both Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah present a fusion of priestly and deuteronomic ideologies (or, more precisely for Chronicles, a retelling of the Deuteronomistic history from a more priestly perspective).

Prophetic books attest to the deep influence of these points of view as well. Ezekiel is itself a priestly work, and it has also been influenced by deuteronomic thinking. Jeremiah was edited by a group of deuteronomists (or rather, by scribes deeply influenced by deuteronomic thought) who made substantial additions to the prophet's discourses.³ Further, even Jeremiah's original discourses, preserved in an

earlier stratum of the book, show deep affinities with a deuteronomic outlook. The prevalence of deuteronomic material throughout the canon can give naive readers the impression that the Hebrew Bible's theology is identical with deuteronomic theology.

The dominant position of priestly and deuteronomic texts in the final form of the Hebrew Bible has obscured the very existence of the fluidity traditions, and it was for this reason that I needed to spend so many pages sketching out their perception of God's bodies and selves. The amount of space the Pentateuch devotes to the God of either P or D, for example, dwarfs the amount given to the God of J and E. We first meet J's God in Genesis 2–3 (where in any event His fluidity is less evident) only after having met P's deity in the deeply impressive and majestic creation narrative of Genesis 1. As a result, we tend to read the fluidity traditions within a framework provided by the antifluidity texts, a framework that encourages us to view evidence of fluidity as mere metaphor or not to notice that evidence at all.

Yet portrayals of Yhwh as possessing multiple bodies and overlapping selves do occur in ancient Israel's scriptures. Editors who were primarily loyal to priestly and deuteronomic outlooks in effect covered these portrayals with a veil, but they neither destroyed them nor altered them beyond recognition. These less common portrayals constitute what we might call a minority position within the Hebrew Bible. The contrast between the Hebrew Bible's treatment of this minority position and its attitude toward some other forms of Israelite theology is revealing. At least some ancient Israelites, to judge from the biblical evidence and perhaps also from archaeological evidence, believed in more than one god; some worshipped goddesses alongside Yhwh.⁴ The polytheistic theologies of these Israelites have been banished from the Hebrew Bible, which repeatedly, insistently, and unambiguously denounces them. (The presence of a few vestiges peaking through a frozen linguistic expression here and a brief passage given new meaning by its larger context there hardly overturns the force of this observation.⁵) The fluidity tradition, however, is not excluded from the biblical canon. The final form of the Hebrew Bible tempers that tradition and calls it into question, but it allows it to remain within the sacred precincts.

What does the presence of this portrayal within the Hebrew Bible mean for a religion based on that anthology? Here I begin to speak not only as a historian of religion but as a committed Jew who hopes to contribute something to the ongoing development of Torah. I address this question, in other words, not only as a biblical critic but also as a biblical theologian,⁶ and my bedrock assumption as a biblical theologian is that every passage found in sacred scripture is there to teach us something. We may have the right to react to what is in scripture; we may have the right to disagree with it; but we have no right to ignore it. A Jewish understanding of God that does not reflect the fluidity tradition is a defective one. What once was Torah in some way always remains Torah; supersessionism is not

a Jewishly valid option.⁷ Without necessarily accepting the fluidity tradition in its entirety (or the more common biblical notion that God has one body), the modern religious Jew ought to see what this tradition has to contribute to contemporary attempts to perceive the divine.

In what follows, I attempt to answer the question, “What do the Hebrew Bible’s fluidity traditions teach a modern religious Jew?” Before doing so, however, it is useful to note that the fluidity model did not simply disappear from Israel with the final editing of the biblical books or the crystallization of the biblical canon. The theological intuition that stands behind them returned again and again in the literatures that flow out of the Hebrew Bible.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE FLUIDITY MODEL

Even though the deuteronomistic and priestly editors who ultimately shaped the final form of the Hebrew Bible rejected the notions of divine fluidity and multiple embodiment, these notions did not simply vanish. On the contrary, they recur in rabbinic literature, in various forms of Jewish mysticism, and in Christianity. To describe the development of the idea of divine fluidity in later texts and to explore the ways in which later religious movements refashioned it to reflect new historical and social settings would be the work of another two or three books, none of which I am qualified to write. What I intend to do here is merely to give a sense of how postbiblical literatures give witness to the notion of a single God whose manifestations take action on their own without becoming sufficiently independent to impugn the oneness of that God.

RABBINIC LITERATURE: MULTIPLE CONCEPTIONS OF SHEKHINAH

Classical rabbinic texts – that is, texts dating from the first eight or nine centuries of the first millennium C.E. – pick up and synthesize the legacies of the priestly and deuteronomic traditions from the Bible. Thus it is not surprising that they often echo, usually with their own particular terminology, the theological pictures we find in P and in D. For example, rabbinic texts frequently speak of God’s presence as the *shekhinah* or “indwelling.” This postbiblical term is built from the same verbal root found in the noun *miskhan* (tabernacle) and the verb *shakhen* (to dwell), both of which occur so frequently in the Pentateuch’s priestly texts. The rabbinic *shekhinah* in many respects closely resembles the priestly *kabod* described in Chapter 3. In a few rabbinic texts, *shekhinah* simply serves as the rabbinic equivalent of the word *kabod*.⁸ Thus, in *Tanḥuma Naso* 12 the two terms appear as synonyms in a single sentence. Similarly, they replace each other in two versions of Rabbi Yosi’s teaching regarding God’s descent: In b. *Sukkah* 5a he speaks of the *shekhinah*’s descent, whereas in *Mekhilta Beḥodesh* 4 he speaks of

the *kabod*'s.⁹ Rabbinic texts refer to the *shekhinah*'s effulgence (*ziv hashekhinah*), a motif that closely resembles the biblical notion of the *kabod*'s blazing splendor;¹⁰ see, to name a few texts at random, *Shemot Rabbah* 3:2, *Pesiqta Rabbati* 21:4; cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 3:4, *Tanḥuma Buber Beha'alotka* 7.¹¹ Many rabbinic texts simply equate the *shekhinah* with God,¹² just as priestly texts identify God and the *kabod*. Some of these texts, precisely echoing P's portrayal of the *kabod*, claim that the *shekhinah* dwelt on earth between the cherubs in the tabernacle and then the temple (e.g., *Sifre Naso* 58, *Shir Hashirim Zuta* 1:13, *Pesiqta Rabbati* 5:7, *Tanḥuma Wayaqhel* 7),¹³ or that it came down from heaven to rest on Mount Sinai at the giving of the Torah (see *Vayiqra Rabbah* 1:3).¹⁴ Other rabbinic texts pick up a more deuteronomic view. For example, "Rabbi Yosi taught: The *shekhinah* never descended down to Mount Sinai, and Moses and Elijah never ascended to heaven, as it is said 'The heavens are Yhwh's heavens, but the earth He gave to human beings' [Psalm 115.16]" (b. *Sukkah* 5a and *Mekhilta Beḥodesh* 4; see also the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:56 to Song 1.12, as well as *Midrash Hagadol Bemidbar* to Numbers 7.89 and *Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Beḥodesh* 9).¹⁵ In short, many rabbinic texts reflect ideas found variously in priestly and deuteronomic versions of the antifluidity traditions.

Other rabbinic texts that discuss the *shekhinah*, however, suggest something resembling the multiplicity of divine embodiment. Some seem to regard the *shekhinah* as present in a specific earthly location and in heaven at one and the same time. *Tanḥuma Naso* 12 tells us that the angels were dismayed when Moses completed the tabernacle, fearing that the *shekhinah* would abandon them, but God reassured them that the *shekhinah* would remain in heaven even after it entered the earthly sanctuary. The midrash goes on to inform us that the two manifestations or embodiments of the *shekhinah* are not equal. Citing Psalm 148.13 ("His splendor is above heaven and earth"), the midrash asserts that the *shekhinah* is first and foremost on earth; in some less important way, it is also with the angels in heaven.¹⁶ Here God is in two locations, one heavenly and one earthly, which suggests distinct localizations of divinity¹⁷ – that is, in the terminology I laid out in the Introduction, two bodies of God. Elsewhere the idea of the *shekhinah* reflects the ancient notion of the fragmentation of divine selfhood. Several scholars note the importance of a passage in a late rabbinic text, *Midrash Mishle* to Proverbs 22.29, in which the *shekhinah* stands before God and pleads, successfully, on behalf of King Solomon (who would otherwise have been denied a share in the world-to-come). As Peter Schäfer notes in his discussion of this text,

In depicting the Shekhinah as standing up before God and speaking to Him, the Midrash goes very far in its dramatic and bold personification. As a matter of fact, it draws a clear distinction between God and his Shekhinah: the Shekhinah has become a "persona" different and distinct from God.¹⁸

This case is not unique; there are other late midrashic texts in which the *shekhinah* achieves a measure of distinction from God.¹⁹ Yet this distinction is extremely loose or fleeting. For example, both Schäfer and Gershom Scholem point to targumim (ancient Jewish translations of scripture into Aramaic) on Deuteronomy 31.3–8, in which some entity such as the *shekhinah* acts as God or on God’s behalf.²⁰ In Targum Onkelos, God walks before Israel in verses 3 and 8aα, whereas God’s Word (מִימְרֵיהֶם) walks before them in verse 6 and supports them in 8bβ. The situation in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to these verses is more complex: God’s *shekhinah* leads Israel in verse 6, and the *shekhinah* of God’s Word leads them in verse 8. But both the *shekhinah* and God pass before Israel in verse 3; there the two nouns are independent and parallel to each other, whereas in the other verses the *shekhinah* is an aspect of God or of God’s Word.²¹ Immediately thereafter, however, Pseudo-Jonathan tells us that God (alone, and not in concert with the *shekhinah*) will smite the nations. In these passages, the *shekhinah* and/or Word seems to be distinct from God one moment and a part of God a moment later. The theological picture drawn here seems baffling and self-contradictory – until we look at it as a late example of the fluidity models so well attested in ancient Near Eastern literature.²² In short, rabbinic literature that discusses the *shekhinah* attests to both fluidity and antifluidity models.²³

The recurrence of the fluidity model in Judaism of the first millennium C.E. is even more pronounced in the mysticism of that period. We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that some biblical passages display a notion of an “angel” or *mal’akh* who is a part of God but does not encompass all of God. These angels may have acted separately from Yhwh, but they also overlapped with God and could even be referred to as Yhwh. The idea of an angel whose self to some degree overlaps with Yhwh but did not exhaust Yhwh’s self is picked up in mystical texts of the rabbinic era – that is, in *merkavah* (chariot) mysticism, in *heikhalot* (palace) mysticism, and in the texts known as *Shi’ur Qomah* (measuring the height or the body [of God]). This biblical idea of the angel becomes evident in the figure variously called the “angel of the Presence” (*mal’akh hapanim*), the “prince of the Presence” (*sar hapanim*), Yahoel, and Metatron. Some texts identified this figure as a “little Yhwh,” a designation that attests at once to the figure’s overlap with God and the fact that this figure does not incorporate important aspects of God.²⁴ In some of these texts, we are even told that the divine figure called Metatron had once been the human being Enoch. In these texts, then, God’s self overlaps with another being in a manner reminiscent of the ancient Near Eastern theology we examined in [Chapter 1](#). Significantly, the idea of Metatron as a “little Yhwh,” one whose “Name is like his Master’s” (as b. *Sanhedrin* 38b puts it), is especially associated with Exodus 23.21, a crucial E text that refers to this conception of the angel²⁵; this is the case in b. *Sanhedrin* 38b, which nevertheless insists on some distinction between God and Metatron as well, because this text states that one is not allowed to pray to Metatron.²⁶ In this case, a

late example of the fluidity model has correctly found one of its sources in biblical literature itself.

FLUIDITY IN KABBALAH

The fluidity model emerges with even greater strength in classical Jewish mysticism – that is, in the kabbalah as it began to develop in the twelfth century C.E. The kabbalistic doctrine of the *sephirot* in particular constitutes a highly complex version of the notion that the divine can fragment itself into multiple selves that nonetheless remain parts of a unified whole. The *sephirot* are usually conceived of as ten manifestations of God in the universe, as opposed to the utterly unknowable essence of God outside the universe. Although some kabbalists view the *sephirot* as created beings distinct from God, most classical kabbalistic thinkers see in them, as Moshe Idel puts it, “an organic part of the divine essence” whose complex interactions with each other constitute “intra-deical dynamism.”²⁷ These ten *sephirot* relate to each other in ways that disclose a degree of individual existence, yet they never attain the level of independent deities. On the contrary, kabbalistic texts warn against praying to them individually as if they were distinct gods.²⁸ Many texts describe the surprising relationships among various *sephirot*, and in the case of the relationship between the two lowest or most immanent *sephirot*, *yesod* and *shekhinah*, they describe the sexual nature of these relationships. To give a sense of the dynamic and seemingly distinct nature of the *sephirot*, I refer to one such text, *Zohar Terumah* 135a, which I used as a figure for the fluidity tradition in the quotations found in the front matter of this book. I quote it in the translation of Isaiah Tishby and David Goldstein, with explanatory expansions in brackets based on Tishby’s notes, to which I have made some additions and alterations:

Just as they are united above with “one,” they are united below through the mystery of “one,” [The six *sephirot* located above *shekhinah* and below the three highest *sephirot* are formed into a single unit with six extremities. This unification takes place when Jews reciting the *Shema*’ prayer concentrate on the word “one” in its opening verse.] so that she may be with them above, one corresponding with one. [When those six *sephirot* are united with each other, the lowest and most immanent of the *sephirot*, *shekhinah*, which is feminine in gender, can unite by means of sexual intercourse with the *sephirah* known as *tiferet*, located two spaces above *shekhinah*. Thus *tiferet* approaches *shekhinah* via the lowest of the masculine *sephirot*, *yesod*, which is phallic in nature.] The Holy One, blessed by He, one in the world above, does not sit on His glorious throne [The *shekhinah* is seen as the throne on which *tiferet*, i.e., the Holy One, blessed be He, sits. Intercourse, therefore, is described as *tiferet*’s sitting on His/Its throne] until she becomes part of the mystery of “one” like Him, so that there is one with one, and we have already explained the mystery of “the Lord shall be one and His name one” (Zechariah 14:9).²⁹

The complexities of this passage and the highly ramified theosophy lying behind it are beyond my present concerns. What matters for the point I am making is simply that this passage, like thousands of others in the *Zohar* and elsewhere, makes clear that the *sephirot* interact in various ways, including sexual ones, and their interactions suggest their distinct identity. Yet kabbalists nevertheless maintain that they are all part of the unity that is God. All appearances to the contrary are nothing more than a matter of human perception. One of the earliest kabbalists, Isaac the Blind, expressed this unity with a strikingly clear metaphor (in Moshe Idel's translation):

Just as many threads come out of the burning coal, which is one, since the flame cannot stand by itself but only by means of one thing; for all the things [that is, the Sefirot], and all the attributes, which seem as if they are separate, are not separated [at all] since all [of them] are one, as the[ir] beginning is, which unites everything "in one word."³⁰

The phenomenological affinity between these kabbalistic texts and the ancient fluidity model comes to the fore in some of the sexual descriptions of interactions among aspects of God. Several Jewish mystical texts envision the holy of holies in the temple (whether the earthly or heavenly one) as the locus of a sexual union between distinct aspects of God (which lose their distinction and achieve unity through their sexual act). This motif was already adumbrated in the Talmud, when it refers to the sexual union of the cherubs in the temple's holy of holies (b. *Yoma* 54a–b). The motif becomes prominent in prekabbalistic Jewish mystical teachings dating from the mid-first millennium C.E. (in *heikhalot* texts),³¹ and it remains prominent in classical kabbalah of the second millennium C.E. (for example, in the *Zohar*).³²

This motif recalls the literary and ritual motif of sacred marriage in the ancient Near East. More specifically it brings to mind a phenomenon discussed in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#): the presence in ancient Canaanite and Israelite temples of both a *maṣṣebah* (a stone pillar) and an *asherah* (a tree, a bush, or a wooden pole). For the Canaanites and in all likelihood for at least some Israelites, these objects represented the god El and his spouse, the goddess Asherah. To be sure, extant Israelite texts connect the *asherah* pole or tree or bush with Yhwh rather than with the goddess Asherah (as we saw in [Chapter 2](#)). Nonetheless, the presence in prepriestly, predeuteronomistic Israelite temples of both these manifestations of Yhwh, one a hard and erect stone pillar and the other a verdant or once verdant tree or bush, must have retained some sexual connotations in the eyes of many Israelite worshippers, even if they understood both to be manifestations of a single deity, Yhwh. When one considers the obvious sexual connotations of these objects and the fact that both were associated with that single deity, two conclusions suggest themselves. First, the notion of sexual activity occurring within the unity that was Yhwh may well have been part of the thought-world of the prepriestly, predeuteronomistic Israelite monotheists whom I discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Second, this intradi-vine sexual activity was located within the temple precincts, where the *maṣṣebah*

and *asherah* stood together³³ – just as much later Jewish mystical texts located intradivine sexual activity inside the temple, whether in Jerusalem or in heaven.³⁴

In short, postbiblical Jewish mystical texts explicitly locate sexual contact between male and female aspects of the deity in the temple. They insist that these aspects were part of the One God – indeed, the moment of sexual union between the aspects expresses the pinnacle of God’s oneness. In so doing, these texts revive and greatly amplify a prepriestly, predeuteronomic form of Israelite monotheism.

From the sixteenth century on, new forms of the notion of multiple embodiment emerged in the kabbalah of Isaac Luria and his school. In Luria’s teachings, the reciprocal and reflexive activities of various parts of God became vastly more ramified, involving not only the ten *sephirot* but also twelve or thirteen divine countenances (*parzufim*), each of which comprehends its own full-fledged system of ten *sephirot*. These countenances sexually couple and decouple; they descend through each other and merge into each other; and they contract into themselves to make room for other countenances. At the same time, within each countenance various *sephirot* interact as well. One finds here what appears to be a full-fledged polytheistic system, except that all these countenances and their constituent parts are nothing other than emanations from or earthly manifestations of a single God.³⁵ In spite of that deity’s highly fluid selves – which emerge from and return back into each other again and again – that deity remains emphatically one.

Lurianic kabbalah furthermore develops its own notion of multiplicity of divine embodiment. According to Luria, fragments of the Godhead were exiled in the world of matter at the moment of the world’s creation. These fragments consist of sparks of the divine light that is God. Having been exiled from their own Self, these sparks were surrounded by husks (*qelippot*) as they became embedded in the material cosmos. The sparks can be reunited with that Self, however, as a result of Jews’ observance of the Torah; indeed, the reason for the commandments is none other than to bring about this redemption of the divine. In Lurianic kabbalah, then, the body of God suffered multiple small-scale incarnations at the moment of the creation of the world. As in the fluidity traditions known in J and E and in ancient Near Eastern literatures generally, God continues to exist in heaven even as God is located in several particular locations on earth.

A crucial difference between ancient Near Eastern and Lurianic notions of multiple divine embodiment must be noticed, however. For the former, a deity’s many bodies present an opportunity for humans to come close to divinity by worshipping at the local cultic site with its *maṣṣebah*, *asherah*, *betyl*, or *ṣalmu*. Multiplicity in this context is an act of grace to be welcomed and celebrated. For the Lurianic kabbalists, however, the multiplicity of God’s embodiment constitutes a tragedy – a primordial, cosmic tragedy at that. It is a catastrophe to be mourned and reversed. In both religious systems, multiplicity is closely connected with theurgy (that is, with human ritual action that effected some change in the realm

of the divine), but in radically dissimilar ways. In the ancient Near East, humans performed rituals such as the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony described in [Chapter 1](#) in order to induce a gracious deity to become embodied on earth. In Lurianic kabbalah, humans perform rituals in order to send a fragment of a wounded deity back to its heavenly Self. One senses here the extensive development that fluidity traditions underwent in kabbalistic thinking. At the same time, one can see how in some respects kabbalah returns Judaism to a prepriestly, predeuteronomic perception of the divine.³⁶

FLUIDITY IN CHRISTIANITY

It is immediately evident that the fluidity traditions from the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East found expression in Christianity. The most obvious example of fluidity in Christian thought is the notion of the trinity. For all the trouble that Jewish and Muslim philosophers have had with this notion, the trinity emerges as a fairly typical example of the fragmentation of a single deity into seemingly distinct manifestations that do not quite undermine that deity's coherence. It is appropriate, then, that Christian biblical commentators connect the trinity with Genesis 18, the story of the three visitors who came to Abraham's tent, because that passage presents a banner example of the fluidity of Yhwh's selfhood. The exegetical connection between Genesis 18 and the trinity occurs among the Church Fathers in the earliest centuries of Christianity,³⁷ and it is found among commentators more than a millennium later.³⁸ Christian commentators on this passage relate the doctrine of the trinity to precisely those elements of Genesis 18 that I emphasized in my treatment of that chapter in [Chapter 2](#), where I read the story within the context of the fluidity traditions of the ancient Near East. I focused attention there on the narrator's coy refusal to be pinned down on the identity of the visitors and to some extent on even the number of visitors with whom Abraham spoke.³⁹ Augustine, in his treatise on the trinity, emphasizes these elements, too, as he presents his argument that "the episode [is] a visible intimation by means of visible creations of the equality of the triad and of the single identity in three persons."⁴⁰ Discussing the passage, Augustine states,

Abraham saw three men Scripture does not begin the description of the episode by saying, "Three men appeared to him," but by saying, *The Lord appeared to him* (Gn 18:1). Then it proceeds to describe how the Lord appeared to him by introducing the story of the three men, whom Abraham invited in and entertained in the plural, but went on to speak to as one, in the singular; and he is also given a promise about a son for Sarah as by one, whom scripture calls the Lord, just as it says at the beginning of the story, *The Lord appeared to Abraham*. So he invites them in and washes their feet, and sends them on their way as men, but he talks to them as the Lord God, both on being promised a son and on being informed about the imminent destruction of Sodom.⁴¹

For Augustine (and also for Luther), the three men are not literally the three persons of the trinity (one of whom had not yet been born in human flesh in any event), but the text's wording is an intimation of the idea that, where God is concerned, three can in fact be one.⁴² One can summarize my reading of the same passage in very similar words: J's wording in Genesis 18 reflects the old ancient Near Eastern belief that where a god is concerned, three, or two, or seven, or ten can be one. Classic language of trinitarian theology, such as μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑπόστασις (one nature, three persons, or one substance, three manifestations),⁴³ applies perfectly well to examples of Yhwh's fluidity in the Hebrew Bible and to the fluidity traditions in Canaan and Mesopotamia.

The doctrine of the trinity crystallizes primarily in post-New Testament literature,⁴⁴ but the New Testament itself also attests to the persistence of the fluidity model. We have seen that ancient Near Eastern texts are perfectly comfortable envisioning a deity as possessing a heavenly body as well as several earthly ones; Yhwh could be at home in a heavenly palace and at Zion at one and the same time. That a deity came down did not mean the deity did not also remain up. The presence of God and of God-as-Jesus on earth is nothing more than a particular form of this old idea of multiple embodiment, and hence no more offensive to a monotheistic theology than J and E sections of the Pentateuch.

The New Testament also gives evidence of fluidity of selfhood in the sense of overlap between a deity and another being. In the Gospels, we are told that when Jesus came to be baptized in the Jordan River the holy spirit came down like a dove on Jesus (Mark 1.10, Matthew 3.16, Luke 3.22, John 1.32). In John we are told that the spirit remained (ἔμεινεν) on Jesus; in Luke that the spirit came down "in bodily form" (σωματικῶς); and most interestingly, in Mark that the spirit actually entered Jesus (καταβαῖνον εἰς αὐτόν; the other Gospels describe it as coming down on him [ἐπ' αὐτόν]).⁴⁵ This event can be read as an apotheosis – that is, an event in which a deity's self comes to overlap in part, though of course only in part, with the self of a human being.⁴⁶ Much the same may be said of the transfiguration (Mark 9.2–8, Matthew 17.1–9, Luke 9.28–36). In this clear reflex of the old *kabod* tradition, Jesus' appearance suddenly changes, his face shines like the sun, and his clothing becomes extraordinarily bright. (Significantly, Luke 9.30 mentions the glory [δόξη] specifically.⁴⁷) This sort of fluidity differs from what we saw in the Hebrew Bible, where a small aspect of Yhwh's self manifested itself in a *mal'akh*, but not in a human being. It also departs from the model we saw in ancient Near Eastern texts, where one deity overlapped with another deity or became an aspect of another deity.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the model it presupposes – that God's self fundamentally differs from a human self, because God's self can do things that human selves cannot do – draws on the basic religious intuition examined in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#).⁴⁹ The implications of these findings for Jewish understandings of Christianity are addressed in the next section.

AFTERLIFE AND AFFILIATIONS

The ancient religious intuitions we found in JE texts and Israelite inscriptions were deeply indebted to the Canaanite and Mesopotamian matrix from which many biblical texts, especially those stemming from priestly and deuteronomic traditions, attempt to free themselves. These intuitions never quite died within Jewish monotheism, but manifested themselves with great power long after their precursors in the ancient Near East had been forgotten. In spite of the attempts of priestly and deuteronomic texts to suppress these intuitions, they recur in rabbinic literature, in Jewish mysticism of both the kabbalistic and prekabbalistic varieties, and in the offshoot of Judaism that came to be known as Christianity.

The presence of the fluidity model in postbiblical religion entails the persistence into the Middle Ages of the intrabiblical debate between J, E, and related texts on the one hand and priestly and deuteronomic texts on the other. In particular, some arguments between mystical and philosophical strands in Judaism can be seen as a late manifestation of the intrabiblical debate. The endurance of these religious intuitions and the debates they spawned can sensitize us to conceptual affiliations that span millennia. We have seen that Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature insist on the primacy of the verbal representation of God. For them, only God's name, a verbal symbol, is on earth, not God's body (much less God's bodies). Thus they emphasize the *representation* of God on earth rather than the *presentation* of God there. In light of their focus on representation and hence the manipulation of symbols, the deuteronomists can rightly be seen as forebears of the philosophical strains in medieval and modern Judaism. Thus it is quite appropriate that Maimonides cites Deuteronomy much more often than any other biblical book in his philosophical work, *Sefer Hammadda*^c – more often, in fact, than the other four books of the Pentateuch put together.^{49a} Priestly literature, with its stress on the actual presence of God's body on earth in the form of a spectacular though hidden light, emerges as a forerunner of the mystical traditions within Judaism.⁵⁰ Furthermore, J, E, and other fluidity traditions provide a template for other theological intuitions found in both kabbalistic and prekabbalistic Jewish mysticism.

Affiliations of this sort are not limited to Judaism. G. Ernest Wright, in a surprisingly honest and polemical article, argues that Protestant Christianity remains faithful to what he calls “the central stream of Biblical theology” because it inherits and understands the deuteronomic theology of symbolic rather than real presence.⁵¹ He contrasts the Protestant's faithfulness to Old Testament theology with Catholic and Orthodox notions of God's real presence in communion. Wright regards these notions as a throwback to the magical and pagan ways of thinking that, he avers, the Old Testament attempts to combat.⁵² (Wright's essentially anti-Papist article is probably the only piece of scholarship written by a twentieth-century professor of Bible at Harvard University that the Congregationalist founders of that institution would have appreciated – indeed, perhaps the only one that would

not have appalled them.) One might rephrase Wright's thesis quite simply: The Deuteronomists were Protestant. This thesis is correct, as far as it goes; we can rightly correlate D's refusal to apply the term "holy" to space⁵³ with a Protestant aesthetic in church architecture, which often eschews a notion of the church building as God's home.⁵⁴ Paul Tillich's comment about Protestantism, that it is "a religion of the ear and not of the eye,"⁵⁵ applies perfectly to the theology of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school, in contrast to that of P, J, and most prophets.⁵⁶

What Wright fails to recognize, however, is that although D is Protestant, P is Catholic,⁵⁷ for P insists that God's real bodily presence came to dwell on earth at the home of the priestly cult.⁵⁸ J and E are Catholic in an even more significant way: Just as the Israelite God became present in many bodies on earth as Israelites anointed stelae and sacred poles, so too the Christian God's body is present in many locations at once whenever Catholics or Orthodox Christians gather for the Eucharist. My point here is not to endorse Catholicism or Protestantism as the true biblical religion. Rather, I simply wish to point out the impressive and startling endurance of ancient beliefs in religions that lay claim to the Hebrew Bible as their scripture, and I intend to recognize the rich debate that the fluidity and antifluidity traditions continue to inspire.

CHRISTIANITY IN LIGHT OF JUDAISM'S EMBODIED GOD

This study forces a reevaluation of a common Jewish attitude toward Christianity. Some Jews regard Christianity's claim to be a monotheistic religion with grave suspicion, both because of the doctrine of the trinity (how can three equal one?) and because of Christianity's core belief that God took bodily form.⁵⁹ What I have attempted to point out here is that biblical Israel knew very similar doctrines, and these doctrines did not disappear from Judaism after the biblical period.⁶⁰ To be sure, Jews must repudiate many beliefs central to most forms of Christianity; these include a commitment to a person whom Judaism regards as a false messiah; the repudiation of the Sinai covenant to which God committed Godself and Israel eternally; the veto on the binding force of Jewish law; those aspects of Christian ethics that subjugate justice to victimhood; and the rejection of God's baffling but sovereign choice of a particular family and that family's descendants. No Jew sensitive to Judaism's own classical sources, however, can fault the theological model Christianity employs when it avows belief in a God who has an earthly body as well as a Holy Spirit and a heavenly manifestation, for that model, we have seen, is a perfectly Jewish one. A religion whose scripture contains the fluidity traditions, whose teachings emphasize the multiplicity of the *shekhinah*, and whose thinkers speak of the *sephirot* does not differ in its theological essentials from a religion that adores the triune God.⁶¹ Note that the Christian beliefs that Judaism rejects are not specifically theological in nature. The only significant theological difference between Judaism and Christianity lies not in the trinity or in the incarnation but

in Christianity's revival of the notion of a dying and rising God, a category ancient Israel clearly rejects.⁶²

Indeed, in light of this study, certain clichéd assumptions common among both Jews and Christians who attempt to distinguish their theologies must be stood on their heads. Divine embodiment, paradoxically, emerges from this study as far more important to Judaism than to Christianity. For the Tanakh, for rabbinic literature, and for important strands in Jewish mysticism, God has always been a corporeal being. For Christianity, in contrast, God deigned to take on a body at a particular moment in time; existence in a body was not part of the eternal essence of divinity.⁶³ In short: Christians believe in incarnation, whereas the Tanakh simply believes in embodiment.⁶⁴ This difference between the Jewish model of divine embodiment and the Christian emphasis on incarnation nullifies, indeed overturns, an entire tradition of anti-Christian polemic within Judaism. The Maimonidean, of course, still has the right to reject Christianity's theological model; but many a modern Jew recognizes the extraordinarily strained nature of the hermeneutic through which Maimonides attempts to deny the corporeality of the biblical and rabbinic God. For such a Jew, Maimonides' rejection would also compel a rejection of most of the Written and Oral Torahs. It would entail, in other words, the creation of a new religion whose earliest sacred document would be found in the tenth-century C.E. philosophical writings of Maimonides' predecessor, Saadia Gaon.

The ironies this line of thinking uncovers are relevant to Christianity as well as to Judaism. Within Christian biblical scholarship, not to mention Christian theology, one often finds a aversion or even condescension toward the priestly writings of the Pentateuch. The enormously influential Lutheran biblical critic Julius Wellhausen frankly admits that he prefers epic narratives and prophetic literature as more attractive and more accessible than the core of priestly material in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, and this preference constitutes the starting point for his analysis of Israelite religion.⁶⁵ The Reformed biblical theologian Walther Eichrodt describes P as stressing God's transcendence, unapproachability, and law, in clear contrast to Christianity's superior emphasis on the immanence, availability, and grace made known through Jesus Christ.⁶⁶

Yet it has become clear in this exposition that the P document is in fact the most Christian section of Hebrew scripture. As one reads through P beginning with Genesis 1, one can see that for all its attention to specifics, this narrative has a larger, overarching concern: the decision of a transcendent God to become immanent in the world this God created. The priests begin their work by describing how God created the world (Genesis 1), and then they tell us of a rupture between God and the world in the act of cosmic destruction and re-creation known as the flood. The theme of God's distance from the world appears not only in the narrative of rupture but also in the original act of creation itself, for the subject who creates stands outside the object created. P subsequently narrates, at much greater length, God's attempt to overcome this distance. Doing so requires the designation of the servants who will build the receptacle for God's body on earth and hence

their liberation from Egyptian bondage. It further necessitates the itemization of architectural features and the cultic rules that will make the paradox of the transcendent God's immanence possible; we find these, respectively, in the last half of Exodus and throughout Leviticus and Numbers. Although this itemization might strike some readers as legalistic (or at least very, very detailed), it nonetheless describes an act of divine grace, for those rules provides the means for God to enter the world and thus for humanity to approach God. In broad terms, P's basic story and the New Testament's are of the same type. Although they differ in many details (not the least of which is P's rejection of fluidity), their fundamental similarity renders deeply ironic many Christians' aversion to this part of their scripture.⁶⁷

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The priests and the deuteronomists rejected the fluidity model because of the dangers it posed. In their day, the fluidity model's connection with ancient Near Eastern polytheism rendered that model, even in its monotheistic or monolatrous forms, deeply problematic. If Samaria had its own Yhwh just as Tyre had its own Baal, then these gods must be similar. Could one not worship both? If Yhwh could fragment and overlap with an angel, then why could Yhwh not overlap with Marduk as well? Belief in a Yhwh of Samaria could easily lead to polytheism. Hosea, who endorses the fluidity model, protests against this danger (and thus attests to it) when he insists that, contrary to popular belief, Yhwh is not a baal-god (e.g., Hosea 2.18).⁶⁸ Subsequently, the author of Deuteronomy takes Hosea's protest much further and rejects the model altogether. But for Jews of our own age, the fluidity model poses no such danger. After all, the theological obstacle facing most contemporary Jews, even some religious ones, is hardly the belief in *more* than one deity. The reasons for rejecting the fluidity model and the notion of embodiment it entails are no longer pressing, and therefore it behooves contemporary Jews to reexamine these ancient traditions. Might God in fact have a body of intense light or energy, which can inhabit many places at once? Can contemporary Jews have faith in God so conceived? What do they regain by doing so? What dangers lurk in reexamining this tradition? Most crucially: what aspects of God does the fluidity model help, or force, the modern Jew to see?

IMPLICATIONS OF EMBODIMENT

These questions need really to be asked twice, once about the notion of divine embodiment on earth itself (for example, as found in P) and once about the notion of multiplicity of divine embodiment. The Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod has already pointed out various implications of the former: for example, that a belief in divine embodiment bolsters the central place of law in Jewish life by focusing our attention on the concrete demands that came from a concrete God, as opposed to ethical but less tangible suggestions from a spiritual deity.⁶⁹

This can be true not only in a general sense but also in relation to specific laws. A God with a body is a God who can rest – that is, a God who can cease acting on another set of bodies. Acknowledging a God who can rest, in turn, fosters a Sabbath conceived of and practiced in a concrete (that is to say, a *halachic*) manner, not only a symbolic or spiritual one. (It is the P document, with its embrace of divine embodiment on earth, that tells us that God rested on the seventh day [Genesis 2.2–3, Exodus 31.17]. Not coincidentally, in Deuteronomy’s version of the Decalogue [Deuteronomy 4.12–15] the Sabbath is no longer based on divine rest. D downplays the notion of divine embodiment by insisting that God’s body never comes to the earth. As a result, D’s notion of the Sabbath is more practical and ethical. It connects the Sabbath to Israel’s release from the labor of Egyptian bondage. To be sure, D’s notion of the Sabbath is also legal and not merely spiritual in nature, because the demand of the Redeemer retains covenantal force; but the absence of the priestly idea of Sabbath, in which humanity imitates the rest of a physical God, underscores the basic contrast between D and P.)

Further, as Wyschogrod rightly maintains, an emphasis on the body entails an acknowledgment of sacred space and sacred land.⁷⁰ For most biblical texts, God is or was physically present in particular locations, and it is this actual divine presence that sanctifies space – more specifically, that sanctifies particular, bounded spaces. The centrality of the idea of divine embodiment on earth in biblical and rabbinic religion means that a theology of the land must remain important for any authentic form of Jewish thought. Of course, the land in question is a specific one, the land of Israel. Consequently, the return to a prephilosophical form of Jewish thought regarding divine embodiment challenges some liberal forms of Judaism, especially those of nineteenth-century Germany. It also challenges some liberal Jews, especially those of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century academy.

At the same time, we saw in [Chapters 4 and 5](#) that the fluidity models undercut a theology of the land even as they endorse it. They accomplish this, paradoxically, by multiplying sacred space. For J, E, and several other biblical texts, Jerusalem’s sacrality is not unique; Bethel and Dan and any place where God inhabits a *maṣṣebah* or *asherah* – indeed, even places in the wilderness of Sinai, outside the promised land – have an analogous status. This is not to say that for J and E the notion of sacred space has been emptied of content. On the contrary, these texts regard some spots as housing God, as the term “Bethel” itself states. But they manage nevertheless to restrain the notion somewhat simply because they do not view such a spot as without peer. There could be any number of such locations; potentially, any place (to judge from Exodus 3–4, even a place outside the land of Israel) could become holy.

Furthermore, in light of the double-edged nature of the concept of sacred space in the fluidity tradition, it became easier for us to note some ambivalence even in the antifluidity traditions. A basic feature of the notion of multiple embodiment

in Mesopotamian religion was that a god's entry into a statue did not entail the god's eternal residence there. When angry, the god could desert the statue, leaving it nothing but a few pieces of metal, wood, or stone. The same could be said of the holy of holies in the priestly sanctuary. On the one hand, the dedication of the sanctuary described in Exodus 40–Leviticus 9 functioned like the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony, ushering the divine body into the earthly space. But just as the *mīs pî* ceremony did not ensure the eternal presence of the divine in the statue, so too the dedication rites performed by Moses, Aaron, and their family brought no promise that God would dwell in the tabernacle or temple forever. The priestly traditions did not regard the spot of God's dwelling as permanent. The tabernacle moved; it was designed to move; and thus in the Pentateuch and Joshua the *kabod* was not rooted in any one place. It did eventually settle down in the Jerusalem temple, but even then the threat that God might abandon that temple remained tangible.

Indeed, that threat was central to the entire sacrificial cult legislated by P. The priestly cult, with its complex laws of purity and sacrifice, was designed to purge the temple of impurities that might lead God to ascend back to heaven (as above all Jacob Milgrom has shown⁷¹). The entire priestly code is predicated on the belief that God need not dwell in the temple forever; its very reason for existence is to deter the real possibility of God's exit. Ezekiel described how the *kabod*, infuriated by the nation's disloyalty, walked out of the temple and flew away in Ezekiel 8–10, thus desacralizing the Temple Mount. To be sure, Ezekiel foresaw a divine return to a newly built temple in chapters 40–48, but for all those chapters' wealth of geographic specification, they never tell us where the new temple will be located – that is, which plot of land will be hallowed in the future by God's presence. (Readers often assume he refers to Jerusalem, but this assumption, we noted in [Chapter 4](#), is unwarranted.⁷²) Because it is God's body that renders land holy in priestly traditions, and because God's body may not abide there forever, it follows that the sacrality of space for P is always conditional. Here again, we are confronted with biblical texts that uphold the notion of sacred space even as they temper it.

This relativizing of the religious importance of space is even more pronounced in the deuteronomistic traditions. They in fact deny the existence of sacred space at all: The deuteronomists maintain that God never dwells in any earthly location but remains in heaven, and for this reason they never apply the adjective "holy" to the future home of the temple in their many references to that place. Yet the deuteronomists are no radical democratizers of space. On the contrary, they insist that one spot is more special than all others, that the cult can take place in the one location where God will place His name. That spot will have an extraordinary value, but its value will be symbolic, pointing toward God rather than housing God. Thus the deuteronomists at once reject the idea of sacred space even as they exalt the status of what was generally regarded as the holy city.

In the fluidity traditions (e.g., J and E) and in the antifluidity tradition that stresses divine embodiment (P), sacred space remains a crucial category. In the antifluidity tradition that keeps divine embodiment firmly outside the earthly realm (D and Dtr), religiously significant space remains similarly crucial. But for all these traditions, the spatial categories are fraught with, and moderated by, complexity. Sacred or religiously significant space exists, but its existence hardly constitutes a guarantee of divine presence. The similarity of the diverse biblical traditions under consideration as they relate to the category of space is quite remarkable. They all emphasize the importance of this category, but each one relativizes the category as well. In this respect, our investigations pose as much of a challenge to Jews on the right as to Jews on the left.

The models of intermittent divine presence as they appear variously in P and in the fluidity traditions raise a further question for modern Jews. Because there is no temple in the present (and hence no earthly divine presence), we must say that God is not in Jerusalem now. It might follow that the Temple Mount's holiness (and in turn the holiness of the whole land of Israel) is vestigial and potential but not real. And, as we have seen, even when it was real in the biblical period, it was always open to question. If we follow P and JE, then, the holiness of land is always either a *potential holiness* or a *conditional holiness*. This sort of holiness may be the only holiness possible in Judaism.⁷³

FLUIDITY AND THE MONOTHEISTIC GOD

The Bible's fluidity traditions are not polytheistic. J and E and the other texts that evince the notion that God has more than one body never speak of other gods having any independent power or import, and they oppose the worship of other deities.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, one may tend initially to think of the fluidity model, even in its monotheistic form, as closer to paganism and to view the antifluidity model as representing a purer monotheism. The emphatically embodied God of the fluidity traditions seems, at first glance, to lack the radical differentiation from humanity that must be required of a monotheistic conception of divinity. In any event, that is surely how P and D must have seen the matter. Further reflection shows the opposite to be the case. The fluidity tradition presents us with the most profoundly monotheistic perception of God in the Hebrew Bible.

Yochanan Muffs points to a tension that pervades and nourishes the entire Hebrew Bible. He argues that

the tension between the concept of transcendence, which insists the Deity is not to be identified with the *physis* of the world, and radical personalism, which insists the Deity is anthropomorphically involved in the world, is the very source of the creative dynamism of biblical anthropomorphism.⁷⁵

I would like to suggest that the fluidity traditions provide an especially deft resolution to this tension, a resolution that comes into focus when we contrast the

fluidity model with some other theological models with which it might initially be confused. The notion of multiple embodiment, it must be stressed, is not identical with the idea that God's presence pervades the world or, less pantheistically, the idea that the effects of God's presence (which might also be termed God's concern) pervade the whole cosmos, a notion expressed most eloquently and famously in Psalm 139.7–10:

Where can I go away from Your spirit?
 Where can I escape your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, You are there.
 If I make the underworld my bed, here You are.
 If I ride the wings of dawn to the nethermost west,
 There, too, Your hand will guide me, and your right arm will hold me in.

In these pantheistic or panentheistic conceptions, God can be equally present in all things and all places. The notion of multiple embodiment is something else altogether. Although they acknowledge that God's power and concern can reach any place, the fluidity traditions maintain that God is literally located in some objects and not others: God is here, in this rock that has been anointed, but not there, in that one. In this regard, the fluid God retains a degree of transcendence that is lacking in the antifluidity traditions on the one hand and in pantheistic and panentheistic understandings of God as omnipresent on the other. The conception of God as multiply embodied allows for the possibility that God can be anthropomorphically involved in the world even as God is not identified with the world, because this God is bound to no one place. For a monotheistic religion that insists on God's personhood and on God's intimate concern with the world, the concept of multiple embodiment cuts the Gordian knot: God is not the same as the world's *physis*, but God can choose to inhabit specific parts of the *physis* in order to be present to His worshippers. This concept, then, seems almost inevitable as a consequence of the biblical stress on both transcendence and immanence. It is precisely when there is only a single divine body, on the other hand, that the tension between these two forces in biblical religion becomes so severe: If the divine person has one body, that body must be in a particular place. If that place is on the planet Earth, then God is clearly immanent but not transcendent. If that place is exclusively in heaven, then God is transcendent but not immanent. (In its most extreme forms, the tension produces a line of reasoning that leads to highly abstract conceptions of God that deny not only divine embodiment but even divine personhood [e.g., in the philosophical work of Maimonides or, quite differently, in the thought of Mordecai Kaplan].) In light of this tension as it emerges in the antifluidity traditions, it is not at all surprising that notions of multiple embodiment appear again and again in Judaism even after P and D attempted to stifle them.

The fluidity traditions furthermore emphasize the radical difference between God as person on the one hand and humanity on the other. In fact, they do so much more strongly than priestly and deuteronomic writings in which God has

only one body.⁷⁶ Postrabbinic teachings according to which God has no body also stress the difference between God and humanity, but those teachings achieve this differentiation at the cost of the personal God. In this regard, Elaine Scarry's statement that "to have no body is to have no limits on one's extension out into the world"⁷⁷ points toward a crucial point. A normal body – that is, a single body, constrained in space – is limited. But in the fluidity traditions, God differs from humans not in that God has no body, but in that God's bodies are unlimited. A God who can be in various *asherot* and *maṣṣebot* and in heaven at the same time is embodied but in no way constrained. Now, any physical God, whether a God with one body or with many, is a God who can change. Such a God, furthermore, is a deity in whom we can find pathos; a God who can change is a God who can experience joy and pain, loneliness and love. And that physical God of pathos, with one body or many, can seek out humanity.⁷⁸ But only the God with many bodies can rise above God's own physicality. The God with many bodies remains woundable and alterable, but this deity can nevertheless be omnipotent.

In short, the fluidity model manages, to a greater extent than the traditions that posit a single divine body, to preserve God's freedom and transcendence even as it maintains the divine personhood and vulnerability so central to biblical and rabbinic literature. Here we note a significant irony. The most extreme antifluidity positions are those of the philosophers, especially Saadia and Maimonides, who insist that monotheism is incompatible with a belief in divine embodiment, as Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit point out:

For Maimonides the belief in the oneness of God meant not merely denial of polytheism, which is obvious, but, more important, denial of the perception of God himself as a complex being. The description of God as one according to Maimonides refers mainly to his own "simple unity." "Multiplicity" is therefore not only the belief in many gods, it is also an error that concerns God himself, which may be called "internal polytheism." The strict demand on unity implies a rejection of corporeality, which assumes that God is divisible like any other body.⁷⁹

The essence of the fluidity model, however, lies precisely in the recognition that God's divisible bodies are not in fact like any other bodies. God's divisibility does not detract from God's might or transcendence; because the number of divine bodies is potentially infinite, the disappearance or fragmentation of any one of them is, ontologically speaking, a matter of no concern. It follows that the fluidity model may preserve God's uniqueness and transcendence no less than the philosophical theology of Maimonides.⁸⁰ Further, the fluidity model is considerably less limiting than the priestly or even deuteronomic models. For P and for the Zion-Sabbaoth traditions described in [Chapter 4](#), God was present in a particular sanctuary and nowhere else; according to these texts, we could once say, "God is Zion." For D and Dtr, God was emphatically not present in Zion or anywhere else under the heavens; according to them, we were able to say positively, "We know that God is

not in Zion.” But for the fluidity model, we could only say, “God is to some degree present in Zion, and God may be elsewhere as well, if not today then tomorrow or yesterday.” The fluidity model makes God both accessible and unknowable.

The depth of the fluidity model, then, is its extraordinary ability to bridge gaps, to be on both sides of what we thought was a polarity. “The value of anthropomorphism,” Mark Smith has written,

deserves fuller consideration. In some contexts it could convey the personal aspects of divinity and its accessibility in the face of a general notion of divine transcendence. If divinity is analogous to humanity, then divinity is perceptible as personal, as the paramount paradigm of personal relations remains human-human interaction.⁸¹

In the fluidity model, however, it is through a form of anthropomorphism that the analogy between humanity and divinity is broken down. It is of all things the God present in multiple bodies who is completely unlike us. Such a God is, to recall the poet Friedrich Hölderlin’s words, at once nearby and hard to grasp:

Nah ist,
und schwer zu fassen der Gott.⁸²

Yair Lorberbaum points out that philosophers, theologians, and mystics reject anthropomorphism in part because they hold that a god with a body is exposed, visible, and hence not mysterious. (“A god who is understood is no god at all,” he quotes Augustine as saying).⁸³ But in the fluidity model, precisely the opposite is the case. That model speaks of a God with a body, and hence a God who can be nearby, but its God is also radically unlike a human being, for God’s fluid self and unity across multiple bodies are fundamentally incomprehensible to humanity. Rudolph Otto’s categories of “wholly other” and “mysterious,” we learn from the fluidity model, do not consist only of “transcendent” or “distant.” The immanent deity of the fluidity model can, mysteriously enough, be wholly other, even more so than the transcendent one.

Yhwh’s fluidity does not render Yhwh something akin to a polytheistic deity, even though we saw in [Chapter 1](#) that the gods of ancient Near Eastern polytheism were fluid.⁸⁴ Rather, the perception of divinity we have explored here reflects Yhwh’s freedom, even as it expresses Yhwh’s grace – more specifically, Yhwh’s desire to become accessible to humanity. This conception renders God an unfathomable being, but nevertheless one with whom we can enter into dialogue.⁸⁵ This God matters to a modern Jewish theology, as do the texts in which this God was first perceived.

Appendix: Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel

It is a commonplace of modern biblical scholarship that Israelite religion prior to the Babylonian exile was basically polytheistic.¹ Many scholars argue that ancient Israelites worshipped a plethora of gods and goddesses, including Yhwh as well as Baal, El (if or when he was differentiated from Yhwh),² Ashtoret, and perhaps Asherah. Preexilic texts from the Hebrew Bible, according to these scholars, are not genuinely monotheistic; the first monotheistic text in the Hebrew Bible is the block of material beginning in Isaiah 40, which was composed during the Babylonian exile.³ Some scholars recognize the existence of a small minority of monotheists or protomonotheists late in the preexilic period, but stress that the vast majority of ancient Israelites were polytheists before the exile.⁴ Another group of scholars, however, argue that the exclusive worship of Yhwh as the only true deity was widespread in ancient Israel well before the exile, perhaps even well before the rise of the monarchy.⁵

In what follows, I hope to accomplish two tasks. I intend to show that the Hebrew Bible is rightly regarded as a monotheistic work and that its monotheism was not unusual for Israelite religion in the preexilic era. At the same time, I hope to explore the limitations of the term “monotheism” in light of the discussion in the body of this book and the review of the literature I carry out in this appendix. The polarity “monotheism-polytheism” has some explanatory value, because it helps us notice something we might otherwise have missed. At the same time, its explanatory value has been overestimated, because it obscures connections that transcend this polarity. I return to this second issue especially in my concluding remarks.

In order to understand why we can rightly label the Hebrew Bible monotheistic and also in what specific ways doing so is important, we need first of all to address two issues: how the term “monotheism” is best defined and the difference between asking whether ancient Israelite religion was monotheistic and whether the Hebrew Bible is monotheistic.

DEFINING MONOTHEISM

Much of the debate in scholarship about ancient Israelite monotheism is really a debate about terminology, rather than one about our understanding of the

ancient texts themselves. There are narrow and broad definitions of monotheism, and depending on which definition we use, we get very different answers to the questions at hand.

A narrow, common-sense definition of monotheism is the belief that one God exists and that no deities exist other than this one God. If we adopt this definition, we must conclude that the Hebrew Bible is not a monotheistic work, because it acknowledges the existence of many heavenly creatures in addition to Yhwh. Biblical texts refer to these creatures variously as “angels” (מלאכים – a few randomly chosen examples of the term include Numbers 20.16, 2 Samuel 24.16, 1 Kings 13.18, Zechariah 1.11–12, Psalm 78.49, Job 33.23), “gods” (אלהים – e.g., Psalm 82.6, 86.8; בני אלהים / בני אלים – Genesis 6.2; Psalm 29.1, 89.7; Job 1.6),⁶ and (collectively) “the council of holy ones” (סוד קדושים / קהל קדושים – Psalm 89.6,8). Several biblical texts portray Yhwh as surrounded by heavenly beings who attend Him or await His orders (e.g., 1 Kings 22.19–22, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, Zechariah 3, Job 1.6; a similar picture is assumed in Psalm 29 and Isaiah 40.1–2).

We may ask, however, how useful this narrow definition really is. After all, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all exhibit a belief in angels, beings who reside in heaven and who do not normally die. In the case of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, we can also note a belief in saints residing in heaven, (i.e., humans who died without any long-term effect on their continued existence and activity); similar beliefs are attested, albeit in a less formalized way in Judaism and Islam (especially in its Shiite and Sufi forms). Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that prayer can be directed to these beings with realistic hope of the prayer’s efficacy. An especially clear example appears in rabbinic literature: The rabbis regard the worship of the angel Michael as a forbidden form of worship (b. *Hullin* 40a, b. *Abodah Zarah* 42b, t. *Hullin* 2:6 [=2:18 in the Zuckerman edition]). As the talmudic scholar José Faur points out regarding this passage, the rabbis “considered Michael a benevolent angel who interceded with God on behalf of Israel. His existence was not in dispute, yet worship of him was considered idolatry.”⁷ The rabbis, who are usually considered to be monotheistic, acknowledged the existence of this heavenly being other than Yhwh and were concerned only that Jews should not worship him. In short, the narrow definition of monotheism is too narrow: If we use it, then the religion of the Hebrew Bible is not monotheistic; but then neither are Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, with the exception of a few highly philosophical forms of these religions that are historically late and have attracted few adherents.⁸

It is also possible to define monotheism more broadly: as the belief that there exists one supreme being in the universe, whose will is sovereign over all other beings. These other beings may include some who live in heaven and who are in the normal course of events immortal; but they are unalterably subservient to the one supreme being, except insofar as that being voluntarily relinquishes a measure of control by granting other beings free will. It is thus appropriate to term the

supreme being the one God and the other heavenly beings gods or angels.⁹ In this definition, it is not the number of divine beings that matters to monotheism but the relations among them. A theology in which no one deity has ultimate power over all aspects of the world is polytheistic (even if that theology knows of only one deity); so too a theology in which people pray to multiple deities because of a belief that multiple deities have their own power to effect change. A theology in which people pray only to one God in whom all power ultimately resides is monotheistic; so is a theology in which people pray to various heavenly beings to intercede on their behalf with the one God in whom all power ultimately resides.¹⁰

One might be surprised at a definition of monotheism that allows for the existence of many gods, but on further reflection one comes to understand that this definition is no less sensible than the narrow one. On the contrary, it is much more sensible. Let us imagine a theology in which there is one supreme being as well as many other beings who have some degree of free will and self-consciousness. These other beings may be mortal or immortal, or they may be both; that is, they may be able to achieve immortality after they die. In such a theology, it is clear that the supreme being is not alone in the universe and is not the only being who can have some effect on the universe. The fact that these other beings have free will constitutes a limitation, though a voluntary one, on the omnipotence of the supreme being. Now, according to the narrow definition outlined above, such a theology is to be classified as monotheism if these beings live on earth and are called “human,” but it is to be classified as polytheism if these beings live in heaven and are called “angels” or “gods.” The broad definition is more consistent and more usable: The theology I just described is monotheism, regardless of where these beings live. There is no reason that we should find the existence of subservient beings in heaven any more surprising in monotheism than the existence of subservient beings on earth. Consequently, it is this second and broader definition of monotheism I adopt in this book.¹¹

I should note two other terms: *monolatry* and *henotheism*. These terms can be defined in a number of ways.¹² They are sometimes used to describe religious systems in which people are permitted only to worship one deity even though the existence of other deities may be acknowledged. Thus we might define monolatry or henotheism so that it is a subset of polytheism. In that case, monolatrous worshippers believe that many gods exist and have real power, but the worshipper nevertheless remains exclusively loyal to just one of those deities. (In this definition, a monotheist is not a monolatr.) Alternatively, we might define monolatry as a broad category that includes but is not limited to monotheism. In this case, monolatrous worshippers are exclusively loyal to one deity, whether or not they believe that deity is the only one with unalterable power. No consensus exists among historians of religion or biblical scholars concerning the use of these terms. I use the term in the second, broader sense. Thus a monolatr as I use the term is either a *monotheistic monolatr* or a *polytheistic monolatr*. At the same time,

it is crucial to note that on a practical level it is often difficult to decide whether a particular text or practice represents monotheistic or polytheistic monolatry. When observing a monolatrous practice or reading a monolatrous prayer, we may not know whether a person prays only to one deity because she believes that deity to be the only one with real power or because she has some reason to prefer that deity over many other possible contenders for her worship. Further, in a culture such as ancient Israel, in which most people lived in small highland villages and had little contact with the wider world, it is not clear whether the distinction between monotheistic and polytheistic monolatry would even have occurred to many people; many peasants may have worshipped the only deity they ever knew without pausing to wonder whether other deities that mattered in fact existed.¹³

The term *polytheism*, then, can either refer to the worship of many deities (which is the typical form of polytheism) or to what I called polytheistic monolatry in the previous paragraph (a relatively rare phenomenon). For convenience, I use the term “polytheism” by itself to refer to the former sort of belief – that is, the worship of many deities.

ISRAELITE RELIGION VS. BIBLICAL RELIGION

The question “Is it really monotheistic?” needs to be asked separately for the Hebrew Bible and for ancient Israelite religion. The religious ideas of the former represent a subset of the latter (or, more likely, several closely related subsets).¹⁴ By analogy, we can note that the religious beliefs and practices of American Jews are one thing, whereas Judaism as prescribed by classical rabbinic literature is another, partially overlapping, thing. If we investigate the former, we might find that American Jews are a distinctive religious group when compared to other Americans but that a belief in God, faith in the resurrection of the dead, the weekly observance of the Sabbath, annual celebration of (for example) Shemini Atzeret, and restrictions on which foods may be eaten play little or no role in their religion, whereas for classical rabbinic Judaism (and for a small subset of American Jews) all these elements are of great importance. Similarly, it is possible that the vast majority of ancient Israelites were polytheistic, but that a small minority, whose writings are preserved in the biblical canon, were monotheistic.¹⁵

Consequently, in what follows, we need to ask two different questions. The first question is, “Were the ancient Israelites monotheists?” In answering this question, we can turn to evidence of two types: biblical data and archaeological data. The Hebrew Bible presents its own picture of the religion practiced by Israelites, and that picture contains useful information about them (even though, as with any primary source, the data it presents must be viewed critically). The findings of archaeologists are also crucial for anyone attempting to portray the religious reality lived by men and women in ancient Israel (even though the data that archaeology provides are much less explicit than the biblical data). The second question is, “Are

the documents found in the Hebrew Bible monotheistic?” Answering this question is a matter of investigating the religious practices and beliefs the Hebrew Bible *prescribes* rather than the practices and beliefs it *describes* (and often *proscribes*). For this second question, archaeological data may initially seem less significant, but here too the finds of archaeologists may shed light on the normative claims made by biblical authors.

WERE THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES MONOTHEISTS?

Biblical Evidence

As we turn to our first question, the data from biblical texts are clear and consistent: Biblical authors inform us that a great many Israelites – at times, perhaps even most Israelites – were polytheistic. This is true for the period in which the Israelites wandered in the desert, which is described in the Books of Exodus and Numbers; it is true for the earliest period of Israelite settlement in Canaan, which is described in the Book of Judges; and it is true through the period of the monarchies described in Kings. The Book of Judges narrates a repeating cycle of polytheistic worship by the Israelites, followed by punishment by Yhwh, forgiveness from Yhwh, and further polytheism on the people’s part. The Book of Kings puts tremendous emphasis on the polytheism of Israelites both north and south. Some kings (for example, Hezekiah and Josiah in the south, Jehu in the north) are portrayed as having been exclusively loyal to Yhwh, but quite a few (Manasseh in the south and Ahab in the north, to take two notorious examples) encouraged the worship of many deities in the temples they sponsored. Prophetic books dating from this era paint the same picture. The prophets excoriate Israelites north and south for worshipping Baal and various other deities, whose names some prophets do not deign to report, merely terming them “nothings” (אֱלִילִים).

It is important to emphasize that the biblical texts largely portray the Israelites as polytheists, because many modern scholars somehow assume that the biblical texts must have said that Israelites were monotheists. A depressingly large amount of scholarly writing on this subject consists of an attempt to debunk the Bible by demonstrating something the Bible itself asserts – indeed, something the Bible repeatedly emphasizes: that Israelites before the exile worshipped many gods. A particularly acute example of this tendency is found in the informative and thought-provoking work of the archaeologist William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*. To give but one illustration: Dever asks why the biblical authors do not discuss the many female figurines found by archaeologists in Israelite sites, which he understands to be images of a goddess. (I discuss these figurines on pp. 152–5 of this appendix.) He maintains that their failure to mention these figurines results from their deliberate attempt to suppress any reference to them: “They did not wish to acknowledge the popularity

and the powerful influence of these images.”¹⁶ In fact, however, biblical authors constantly acknowledge the widespread polytheism of Israelites, and they mention Israelite goddess worship specifically on a number of occasions (e.g., Jeremiah 7.18, 44.17–19). Israelite authors (rather like many later Jewish and contemporary Israeli authors) love talking about how awful their own people are; self-criticism, sometimes of an exaggerated sort, is one of the most prominent hallmarks of biblical (and later Jewish) literature. When Dever attempts to portray the Bible as whitewashing Israelite history, he fails to attend to the fact that biblical authors are in fact obsessed with tarnishing Israelite history. Although they do not always realize it, fine scholars like Dever or Ziony Zevit (to name just two recent examples) who argue that preexilic Israelites were polytheists seek not to overturn the biblical picture of Israelite religion but in significant ways to confirm it. On the other hand, scholars like William Foxwell Albright, Yehezkel Kaufmann, or Jeffrey Tigay who minimize the extent of preexilic polytheism reject the biblical picture as inaccurate or vastly overstated.

At the same time that the biblical texts bemoan what they regard as copious examples of Israelite polytheism, these texts also insist that two ideals were already present in Israelite religion from the earliest stages, however poorly those ideals were realized in practice. One was an ideal of monolatry (whether the texts intend a monotheistic or a polytheistic monolatry I discuss in the section on whether the Hebrew Bible endorses monotheism). The other was the ideal of *aniconism*, or the insistence that the Israelite deity should not be portrayed in pictorial or sculpted form. Biblical tradition dates these ideals to the very first moments of Israel’s existence as a nation – that is, to the revelation at Sinai, where the Israelites were commanded, “You shall not have any other gods besides Me; you shall not make yourselves a statue, any picture of what is in heaven above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall neither bow down to them nor worship them” (Exodus 20.3–4).

Archaeological Evidence

What of the archaeological evidence? Surprisingly, it is more mixed than the biblical evidence. Two types of archaeological data suggest that polytheism was extremely rare in preexilic Israel, though not unheard of, whereas a third type may suggest that Israelites worshipped a variety of deities – especially goddesses.

The first sort of evidence comes from ancient Israelite inscriptions (that is, from what scholars call epigraphic evidence), and especially from the personal names they mention (that is, from what scholars call onomastic evidence). Ancient Semites often gave their children names that contain a statement about or prayer to a deity: Thus in Mesopotamia we know kings named “Esarhaddon” or “Ashur-aḥa-idin,” which means “[The god] Ashur has given a brother,” and “Nebuchudrezzar” or

“Nabu-kudurri-ušur,” which means “[O god] Nabu, protect my first-born son!” Ancient Israelites also gave their children names of this sort (known as “theophoric” names). Several decades ago, the biblical scholar Jeffrey Tigay studied theophoric names Israelites gave their children throughout the preexilic era, as evidenced not only in books of the Hebrew Bible but also in archaeological finds that mention personal names (such as letters, official documents, and personal seals).¹⁷ The results, at least for someone inclined to trust the picture the Hebrew Bible paints of consistent disloyalty to Yhwh, were surprising. From early monarchic times on (that is, centuries before the exile), personal names that mention the names of gods other than Yhwh are exceedingly rare. This finding suggests that worship of gods other than Yhwh may have been less common than the biblical texts would lead us to believe. The censures of prophets and scribes whose work is found in the Bible, Tigay surmises, must have exaggerated the extent of the problem they denounced.¹⁸ Similarly, Patrick Miller notes that, even outside the onomasticon,

The weight of epigraphic data from the ninth through the sixth centuries BCE testifies in behalf of the “Yhwh only” stream of Israelite religion, particularly but not only in the south. From the Mesha stele to the finds from Arad, Lachish, and Ramat Rachel, for example, Yhwh is the only named deity in Israelite inscriptions, and Yhwh’s name is mentioned over 30 times.¹⁹

The second sort of evidence comes from an extraordinarily thorough study of ancient Israelite art. Over the course of several decades, the Swiss scholar Othmar Keel built up a database of Israelite iconography, especially as evidenced by stamp seals. In ancient times, people pressed seals down over wax or clay to close a legal document that had been rolled up, thus protecting it from being tampered with, because one would have to break the seal to make any alteration to the document. These seals contained a short text (usually the name of the seal’s owner), some decoration, or (in the vast majority of cases) both text and decoration. Seals were used throughout the ancient Near East. (In Mesopotamia, they were usually rolled over the wax rather than stamped; hence the Mesopotamian seals are known as cylinder seals). Keel’s database includes more than 8,500 stamp seals from the area of ancient Canaan; some belonged to Israelites and some to Phoenicians, other Canaanites, and Arameans. Comparing the Israelite and non-Israelite seals, Keel and his student Christoph Uehlinger noted a startling pattern. Non-Israelite seals portray a wide variety of deities; often more than one deity is present on a single seal. But Israelite seals differ from non-Israelite seals in several respects. First, they tend not to portray more than one deity. This finding suggests that Israelites really did tend to obey the command, “You shall not have any other gods besides Me” (Exodus 20.3). Second, they almost never provide a picture of their deity; rather, the deity is represented symbolically, most often by a sun disk. This finding suggests that Israelites, already in the early preexilic period, tended to

obey the command, “You should not make any sculpted image or picture” of a deity (Exodus 20.4).²⁰ Evidence of polytheism in ancient Israel does crop up here and there, especially in the seventh century B.C.E, but much less frequently than in seals from other cultures. Other forms of art (statuary, graffiti on walls) provide similar evidence. Precisely as Israel begins to emerge in the highlands of Canaan at the beginning of the Iron Age, anthropomorphic representations of deities became vastly less common in those highlands, though they never disappear completely even in Israelite contexts.²¹

What would happen if we wrote a history of Israelite religion exclusively on the basis of the epigraphic, onomastic, and iconographic evidence made available by archaeological investigations, and not on the basis of the testimony of the Hebrew Bible? A comparison of Israelite and non-Israelite artifacts would show a pronounced difference between Israelite religion and the religions of other ancient Near Eastern peoples.²² With important exceptions, Israelites tended to pray only to one deity, whereas other peoples – at least those peoples for whom we have sufficient epigraphic, onomastic, and iconographic evidence to come to a conclusion²³ – prayed to many. In short, these kinds of evidence suggest that Israelites were largely monolatrous – though they do not allow us to decide whether their monolatry was monotheistic or polytheistic in nature.

Onomastic and iconographic data are not the only types of archaeological evidence available, however. Small statues of female figures have been uncovered from many ancient Israelite sites, and many scholars believe they demonstrate that Israelites worshipped a goddess or goddesses. These statues are found overwhelmingly in domestic settings (that is, in the remains of Israelite homes, sometimes in graves, but not in cultic sites or temples). Thus they may inform us especially about how religion was practiced in the ancient Israelite family, rather than about public or official cults sponsored by the king or by communal leaders. Three types of statues have been identified.²⁴

(1) A small number of figurines have been found in Israelite sites from the early Iron Age – that is, the thirteenth through eleventh centuries, the era in which Israel first began to emerge in the highlands in the center of Canaan. These figurines depict a frontally nude woman whose genital triangle and labia are portrayed very prominently. These figurines resemble Canaanite statues of goddesses from the Late Bronze Age, and there can be little doubt that, like their Late Bronze forebears, they represent a goddess who brings fertility. Statues of this kind from Israelite sites are rare, however, and Keel and Uehlinger emphasize that they disappear as we get further into the Iron Age (that is, when Israelite culture had solidified in central Canaan). The few found in the central areas of Canaan as late as the ninth century come from Philistine, not Israelite, sites. In light of these figurines, it is clear that some Israelites worshipped a goddess at the time of the Israelites’ appearance in Canaan, but this worship was relatively marginal and declined quickly.²⁵

(2) Figurines portraying a woman, usually clothed, holding a circular object have been found in Israelite sites from the tenth century on; most date to the seventh century. Scholars disagree about who this woman is and what she is holding. Dever argues that she is a goddess. Identifying the disk as a bread cake, he connects her with the worship of the Queen of Heaven condemned by the sixth-century prophet Jeremiah in 7.18 and 44.17–19.²⁶ Keel and Uehlinger, however, believe these figurines depict a human female worshipper; the disk, they suggest, is a tambourine such as those used by Israelite women in song (cf. Exodus 15.20, Judges 11.34, 1 Samuel 18.6). Thus these women are cult participants, not objects of a cult; they are human and not divine. In short, they do not provide evidence of Israelite worship of a goddess.²⁷ (Other scholars identify the circular object the female holds as a sun disk, in which case she is a solar goddess, but this interpretation has not met widespread acceptance.)

(3) By far the most common figurines – literally hundreds have been found – depict a woman with very prominent, often pendulous, breasts; unlike the figurines from the first category, however, these figurines do not display the woman's genitalia, prominently or otherwise. Instead, at the bottom of these figurines one finds a sort of pedestal that resembles either a tree trunk²⁸ or a woman's robe.²⁹ It seems clear that they are associated not with sexual fertility but with nursing and maternal care. In the eyes of the ancients, these pendulous breasts were associated more with nursing than with sexuality.³⁰ These figurines, made of terra cotta or clay, first appear in the archaeological record later than the first two types of figurines; most date to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.³¹

What were the figurines in this third category? How did they function, and what did they depict? Keel and Uehlinger, who elsewhere highlight the monotheistic nature of Israelite worship, consider these objects to be representations of a goddess and hence of Israelite worship of more than one deity.³² If so, the polytheism they evince was quite widespread in the eighth and seventh centuries (a finding that dovetails perfectly with the testimony of eighth- and seventh-century prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible). These objects were exceedingly common: The archaeologist Raz Kletter notes that they “have been found in almost every Iron Age II excavation in Judah,”³³ and Keel and Uehlinger point out that they were found in nearly half the private homes excavated in Beer-sheba and Tel Beit-Mirsim dating to that era.³⁴ Dever regards these figurines as talismans that worked magic, especially in difficult moments such as childbirth and caring for infants.³⁵ He sees this magical use as further evidence of Israelite polytheism, but here caution is called for. It is not clear that such a talisman in fact depicts a goddess; it is just as likely that it depicts a human female whose large breasts symbolize (or rather help engender through sympathetic magic) a woman's ability to give birth and to nurture. Indeed, the archaeologist and biblical scholar Carol Meyers points out significant differences between these

figurines and statues of goddesses known from ancient Canaan. Statues of the divine, she notes,

normally exhibit some symbols of divine identity in headdress, garb, pose, or attached object. One should be skeptical about identifying any of these terra-cotta statues or related clay plaques with goddesses at all, let alone with any specific goddess such as Ishtar, Anat, or Asherah.³⁶

If the iconography of these figurines clearly picked up on the iconography of other depictions of a goddess elsewhere in Canaan or the Near East, we could confidently identify the figurines as a goddess. However, Keel and Uehlinger point out that no transition from other objects to these objects is evident (a point that opposes their own conclusion that these figurines represent a goddess).³⁷ A scholar of biblical and Mesopotamian culture, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, makes the crucial point that these Israelite figurines differ from Canaanite ones because they “have no overt symbols of any goddess These pillars hold no divine insignia, wear no crowns, and carry no symbols of their power.”³⁸ Consequently, we should follow Meyers and the archaeologist and biblical scholar James Pritchard³⁹ in identifying these objects as representations of human females or of the concept of the female – and especially the maternal – in general. More specifically, Frymer-Kensky maintains that “they are a visual metaphor, which shows in seeable and touchable form that which is most desired They are a kind of tangible prayer for fertility and nourishment.”⁴⁰

Of course, if the objects depict human women (or depict their hopes to nurture) but are still used for magical purposes, we may still ask whether their magical use provides evidence of Israelite polytheism. A moment’s reflection will show that it does not. Within monotheistic religions, magic is often condemned (see, e.g., Exodus 22.17, Deuteronomy 18.10), but it is just as often practiced – by people who considered themselves (and were considered by others) loyal monotheists. Great rabbis, for example, have gained fame for producing amulets. Many rigorously religious Jews believe that unfortunate events in their lives result from having a defective *mezuzah* on their doorposts and can be reversed by repairing it. Beliefs of this sort permeate not only kabbalistic but also rabbinic literature. Some voices in Jewish tradition have condemned such beliefs and practices, but historically those voices have been marginal, and moreover subsequent Jews who practiced what to outsiders appears to be magic did not consider what they were doing to fall into the category that earlier authorities had censured.⁴¹ The reason for this is simple: Many classical Jewish texts, including the Hebrew Bible, accept the reality and effectiveness of magic, but forbid its use by Jews. (Similarly, when biblical law prohibits Israelites from eating pork, it does not intend to deny that pork exists.) For the Hebrew Bible, the use of magic does not represent an error but an act of rebellion against Yhwh, who is a more effective power than magic.⁴² Moreover, because most monotheistic authorities in antiquity and the Middle Ages

did not deny magic's reality or effectiveness, many monotheists at times practiced some magic, and they often managed to regard their actions as a complement to monotheistic worship rather than as an act of rebellion. If the figurines in this third category were in fact used as Dever suggests, then their owners may have been no less monotheistic than enormous numbers of religious Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the postbiblical world. Either we must exclude from the category of monotheism most of traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – including not only popular forms of these religions but highly learned and academic forms as well (it is typically a scholar, for example, who produces amulets using highly specialized scribal and mystical learning), or we must acknowledge that use of these figurines in Israelite homes was compatible with monotheism. We should not discount the first of these possibilities. The example of these figurines suggests, among other things, that the polarity “monotheism vs. polytheism” is of less explanatory value than scholars have recognized; I return to this suggestion subsequently.

Asherah Worship in Ancient Israel?

Another possible indicator of Israelite polytheism from the archaeological record, which may receive additional support from biblical texts, should be addressed: the possibility that the goddess Asherah was popular among ancient Israelites.

As noted in [Chapter 2](#), a Northwest Semitic goddess named Asherah appears prominently in the late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit.⁴³ The term *ʾasherah* occurs often in the Hebrew Bible as well, but scholars debate whether it refers there to the goddess or to a cultic object consisting of a wooden pole or a tree. Because devotion to this goddess declined in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, some scholars wonder whether most Israelites even knew of the goddess's existence. (The Ugaritic texts that discuss her date to the fourteenth through thirteenth centuries B.C.E. in the late Bronze Age and were unknown to the Israelites, who flourished in the Iron Age.) We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that the term *ʾasherah* in scripture usually refers to a wooden cult object, but in rare cases it clearly refers to the goddess, showing that at least some Israelites did know that this word was the name of a goddess.

Did Israelites worship this goddess? Two pieces of evidence are especially relevant: the eighth-century inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom and a tenth-century cult stand from Taʿanakh.

The inscriptions were discussed in [Chapter 2](#), where we saw that for grammatical reasons the term אֲשֶׁרֶתוּ (“His *ʾasherah*”) must refer to the cult object, not the goddess. Further, because no deity other than Yhwh is mentioned in those inscriptions, it seems most likely that the *ʾasherah* they mention was sacred to Yhwh rather than to Asherah. (We noted on pp. 46 and 49 that many zealously loyal adherents of Yhwh described in the Bible regarded this cult object as perfectly acceptable for a person who worshipped Yhwh exclusively; such an *ʾasherah* must have been devoted

to Yhwh rather than to any other deity.) Hence these inscriptions do not provide direct evidence of Asherah worship among Israelites – though the mere existence of a cultic pole of a type that had once been sacred to Asherah (as its name indicates) shows that Asherah worship must have played a role at some earlier stage in the religion of the Israelites or their immediate forebears.

The second piece of evidence comes from an unusually well-preserved cult stand dating to the tenth century.⁴⁴ (Cult stands were used in temples and other sacred sites to support bowls into which liquids or other gifts could be poured. Alternatively, it is thought, they may have been used for burning incense.) This cult stand was discovered in 1968 at Ta'anakh, a northern Israelite site located approximately five miles southeast of Megiddo in the Jezreel valley.⁴⁵ The Ta'anakh cult stand has four registers or levels (see Illustration 2). The lowest or first register depicts a female with prominent breasts and upraised arms that touch two lions, one on each side of her. The next register as one moves up depicts two bovine creatures who have human faces and wings. These mixed creatures are known in Hebrew as כְּרֻבִים or cherubs; like the cherubs mentioned by Ezekiel, those on the Ta'anakh cult stand have human faces, bodily features resembling those of bulls, and wings.⁴⁶ They stand on each side of an empty space in the middle of this register. The third register depicts the same two lions found on the bottom register, but this time, in between them we find a tree with three leafy branches on each side of the trunk; two goats, one on each side, eat the top set of leaves. The top or fourth register shows two spiral scrolls next to the remains of another cherub on each side. (These cherubs are partially broken, but the body and wings are clear from the side view, where their resemblance to the cherubs on the second register is clear.) In between the scrolls is an animal, probably a horse, on top of which sits a sun disk surrounded by rays of light.⁴⁷

Identifying the figures depicted on this cult stand is necessarily speculative, but scholars including Ruth Hestrin and J. C. Taylor have made the plausible suggestion that the first and third registers depict one deity (who is surrounded by lions in both cases), whereas the second and fourth registers both depict another deity (who is flanked by cherubs both times).⁴⁸ There is no question that the large-breasted figure on the first level is a goddess who is associated with fertility and especially with maternal roles. In the third register we find the same goddess, this time depicted as a tree. As we have seen, the term *asherah* in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew refers to a sacred tree, pole, or grove; this and other evidence suggest that the goddess Asherah was associated with trees and could be represented iconographically by one.⁴⁹ Both because of the connection of the term *asherah* with trees and because of the maternal role of Asherah (she is known as “mother of the gods” in Ugaritic literature), it seems clear that the goddess on the first and third level is Asherah.⁵⁰

What of the second and fourth registers, where we find cherubs flanking an empty space and a sun disk on top of a horselike creature? Cherubs are associated



2. The Ta'anakh cult stand. (Drawing: Ellen Holtzblatt)

throughout the Bible with Yhwh. According to many biblical texts, Yhwh rides on top of the cherubim (e.g., 1 Samuel 4.40; 2 Samuel 22.11; Ezekiel 9.3, 10.4; Psalm 80.2, 99.1). In the tabernacle the Israelites erected in the Sinai desert and in the Jerusalem temple, Yhwh sits above statues of cherubim (Exodus 25–26, Numbers 7.89, 1 Kings 6–7). Consequently, Taylor makes the brilliant proposal that the empty space surrounded by cherubs in the second level represents Yhwh, “the unseen God who resides among the cherubim.”⁵¹ The portrayal of this Israelite deity, after all, is insistently prohibited in biblical law (Exodus 20.4), and it is also exceedingly rare in the archaeological record (as Keel and Uehlinger point out).⁵²

In the top register, Taylor suggests, we again find Yhwh flanked by cherubs. This time, Yhwh is represented symbolically but not literally by a sun disk. The association of Yhwh with the sun is known from a few biblical passages, such as Psalm 84.10–12.⁵³ Two passages, 2 Kings 23.11 and Ezekiel 6.1–7, 8.16, depict sun worship in the Jerusalem temple. The Deuteronomistic historians and Ezekiel regard this worship with horror, but the worshippers they condemn probably did not see themselves as worshipping a foreign deity. Rather, they may have intended to bow down to Yhwh as a sun god. (Further, 2 Kings 23.11 attests to a connection between the sun and horses, because it speaks of King Josiah destroying both “the horses that the kings of Judah dedicated to the sun at the entrance to Yhwh’s Temple . . . and chariots of the sun”; this connection, also known among other sun deities, such as Helios, may explain why the sun disk in the Ta’anakh stand sits astride a horse.) The first section of Psalm 19 subtly polemicizes against equating Yhwh and the sun, arguing that the sun is merely one of many creatures who point toward the greatness of the deity who created them. This polemic indicates that some Israelites tended to regard Yhwh as the sun (after all, one does not argue against something that is not a real threat).⁵⁴ The association of Yhwh and the sun is also known from Israelite iconography.⁵⁵ In short, it seems plausible that the top register of the Ta’anakh cult stand portrays Yhwh on a symbolic level as the sun, thus exemplifying precisely the equation that 2 Kings, Ezekiel, and Psalm 19 find problematic.

Taylor points out the basic pattern of the cult stand’s iconography:

Just as Asherah was portrayed “in person” and in symbol on the alternative tiers . . . respectively [that is, in anthropomorphic form on the lower register and by her symbol, the tree, on the higher one], so, too, Yhwh is depicted “in person” [on the lower of His two tiers] and in symbol [on the uppermost tier].⁵⁶

If Taylor is correct, the Ta’anakh stand points to a fascinating example of early Israelite religion. In this form of Israelite religion, we already see the refusal to portray Yhwh that is so characteristic of biblical religion. But this aniconic religiosity is not monotheistic or even monolatrous: The cult stand pairs Yhwh with the goddess Asherah. Many scholars have noted that such a pairing is not surprising. Asherah was the wife of El in Ugarit, and both the name El and imagery associated with him are attributed to Yhwh throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁷ That some Israelites

loyal to Yhwh might assume that He had a wife, and that wife would be Asherah, is to be expected.⁵⁸ If this interpretation of the cult stand is correct, then we can state that, at least at an early stage of Israelite history and at least in the north, the goddess Asherah was worshipped alongside Yhwh.

Were the Ancient Israelites Monotheists?

Both the archaeological and biblical evidence give complex answers to the question, “Were the Israelites monotheistic?” Although the Hebrew Bible claims that the ideal of aniconic monolatry existed in the early preexilic period, it nevertheless claims that loyalty to this ideal was, to say the least, inadequate. On the other hand, much of the archaeological evidence (onomastic and iconographic data) suggests that most Israelites in the preexilic period worshipped only one deity. These data render plausible the biblical claim that the ideal of monolatry existed at an early period, but they shed doubt on the biblical claim that loyalty to the ideal was rare. By its very nature, these archaeological data cannot make clear whether that monolatrous worship was, strictly speaking, monotheistic or polytheistic. Other archaeological data (the pillar figurines) may support the biblical picture of widespread (non-monolatrous) polytheism among Israelites, especially in the eighth and seventh centuries – if we accept the suggestion that the figurines depict a goddess. But if these figurines depict a human female and were used in sympathetic magic, then they probably reflect monolatrous religiosity in domestic settings in ancient Israel. Other sorts of archaeological data (the tenth-century Ta’anakh stand; the tenth- through ninth-century figurines of a naked fertility goddess) clearly point to Israelite polytheism and more specifically to goddess worship at an early stage of Israelite history. In spite of their differences, both types of evidence allow us to speak of Israelite polytheism (whether it was rare or common, it clearly existed), and thus they allow us to note areas of continuity between ancient Israel and the cultures of its neighbors. At the same time, both types also allow us to speak of early preexilic Israelite monolatry as well, and thus to note areas of discontinuity between Israel and its neighbors.

IS THE HEBREW BIBLE MONOTHEISTIC?

The Hebrew Bible at once describes and proscribes polytheistic worship among ancient Israelites throughout the preexilic period. Its own religious ideals demand that the Israelites render to Yhwh exclusive loyalty – that is, these documents endorse monolatry. The question that faces us is whether the monolatry they intend exemplifies what I referred to earlier as the monotheistic variety or the polytheistic variety. Do they imagine Yhwh to be unrivaled among heavenly beings and in exclusive control of all powers in the universe? Or do they imagine Yhwh to be one among many deities, to whom, for a variety of historical reasons, the Israelites have pledged fealty?

Poor Evidence for Biblical Monotheism

The most familiar texts that emphasize that Israelites must worship only one God provide no data regarding this question. “You shall have no other gods besides Me,” Yhwh tells the Israelites at the opening of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.3). Is this because the other gods have no power, or is it simply because Yhwh, having liberated the Israelites from Egypt, has first claim on the Israelites’ religious affections? The text gives absolutely no information that would allow us to answer this question one way or the other.⁵⁹ Other texts seem at first glance to support the idea that the Israelites were monotheistic, but they provide no real support when viewed in their own cultural context. “Who is like you among the gods, Yhwh? Who is like you, exalted in holiness, acknowledged as awesome, performing wonders?” Moses and the Israelites sing at the shore of the Reed Sea (Exodus 15.11; cf. 1 Kings 8.23; Isaiah 40.18; Jeremiah 10.6–7; Psalms 35.10, 71.19, 89.9). Such a verse sounds tailor made to answer our question, because it insists on an essential distinction between Yhwh and all other heavenly beings. Indeed, this line appears in various forms of Jewish liturgy (e.g., in the blessing after the *Shema* in the morning and evening services in rabbinic liturgy; in the Songs of Praise [*Hodayot*] from Qumran, 1QH 7:28), where it can be said to function in a genuinely monotheistic manner.⁶⁰ But a line like this does not always function that way. Other ancient peoples called a variety of gods incomparable. Language of this sort appears with great frequency throughout Sumerian and Akkadian liturgical texts.⁶¹ This is the case not only in prayers to the heads of pantheons such as Ashur in Assyria and Marduk in Babylon⁶² but to other deities as well:

[O lord, ra]diance of the great gods, light of earth, illuminator of the world
regions,
[O Shamash], lofty judge, creator of the above and below,
...
You alone are [mani]fest, no one among the gods can rival you.
(An Assyrian hymn to Shamash)⁶³

I implore you, lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses,
Ishtar, queen of all the inhabited world . . .
Irnini [=Inanna], you are noble, the greatest of the Igigi-gods, . . .
O Mistress, splendid is your greatness, exalted over all the gods.
(A neo-Babylonian prayer to Ishtar)⁶⁴

Warrior among his brothers, princely god,
Lord surpassing all the Igigi-gods,
Nergal, princely god,
Lord surpassing all the Igigi-gods!
(An Akkadian prayer to Nergal)⁶⁵

My lady, your divine powers are great divine powers, surpassing [(other) divine powers],
 Nanshe, your divine powers are not matched by any other divine powers.
 King An looks on with joy.
 He who sits with Enlil on the dais of destiny determination,
 Father Enlil, has determined your destiny.

(An early second-millennium Sumerian hymn)⁶⁶

A god might have been called the greatest or the only god because at a particular moment that god was of paramount importance to the worshipper.⁶⁷ Alternatively, prayers might indulge in exaggeration and flattery.⁶⁸ The Mesopotamian scribes who composed these verses and the worshippers who recited them were perfectly ready to say the same thing about another god the next day. Indeed, the hymn to Shamash was composed for the eighth-century king of Assyria, Assurbanipal, but that king did not hesitate also to call Nabu unparalleled among the gods:

[I sin]g your praise, O Nabu, among the great gods . . . I keep turning to you, O most valorous of the gods his brethren.⁶⁹

It goes without saying, of course, that Assurbanipal's primary loyalty was directed to neither of these two gods but to Assyria's own deity, Ashur.

Even in cases when it was appropriate to call a god the most powerful, such praise is not necessarily monotheistic. A god can be described as greatest while still being one of many powers in the universe. What is crucial for identifying monotheism is some indication that the expression of uniqueness is to be taken literally, some sign that the god being extolled is not limited by any other forces. Generally it is impossible to classify a statement of Yhwh's incomparability by itself as monotheistic or polytheistic. Only a larger context demonstrates that the passage is monotheistic, by showing, for example, that the deity lacks family, cannot be challenged by other gods, or assigned them their minor roles. Nothing like this appears in the poem in which Exodus 15.11 ("Who is like you among the gods, O Yhwh?") appears, so that we cannot cite it as an example of early monotheism in Israel. Such a verse could have been recited by a monotheistic monolatrism, by a polytheistic monolatrism, or even a nonmonolatrous polytheist.⁷⁰ (It is likely that some ancient Israelites who sang this line were monotheistic, whereas others were polytheistic.) The question at hand, then, is whether we can establish what the authors or editors of biblical texts meant when they included it in the Book of Exodus.

The same may be said of biblical texts that stress Yhwh's kingship over the gods, and perhaps even those that stress that Yhwh assigned other gods their roles:

For Yhwh is a great god,
 And king over all the gods.
 The deepest places on earth are in His hands,

And the tops of mountains belong to Him.
The sea belongs to Him – He made it,
And His hands fashioned the dry land.

(Psalm 95.3–5)

All nations, clap your hands!
Shout out to God with joyful voice!
For Yhwh, the highest, the awesome One,
Is the great king over all the earth.

(Psalm 47.2–3)

For Yhwh is great and worthy of much praise;
He is revered more than all the gods.
For all the gods of the nations are nothings,
But Yhwh made the heavens.

(Psalm 96.4–5)

Bestow upon Yhwh, O you gods,
Bestow upon Yhwh glory and might.
Bestow upon Yhwh the glory of His name;
Bow down to Yhwh as He reveals His holiness.

...

Yhwh reigned at the time of the flood;
And Yhwh will reign forever and ever.

(Psalm 29.1–2, 10)

On the one hand, these verses stress Yhwh's omnipotence in contrast to the relative weakness of other deities, who (in the final example) are required to praise the one true God. But one might say something similar even about the high god in a polytheistic pantheon, and various ancient Near Eastern peoples in fact did so, for polytheists, too, can regard some particular deity as king.⁷¹ In *Enuma Elish* 4:3–15 the gods themselves sang to Marduk:

You are the most important among the great gods,
Your destiny is unrivaled, your command is supreme.
O Marduk, you are the most important among the great gods,
Your destiny is unrivaled, your command is supreme.
Henceforth your command cannot be changed,
To rise up, to bring low, this shall be your power.

...

O Marduk, you are our champion,
We bestow upon you⁷² kingship of all and everything.
Take your place in the assembly, your word shall be supreme.⁷³

One might want to take these lines literally and suggest that Marduk is being raised here to the sort of power we associate with a monotheistic God.⁷⁴ However, earlier

in *Enuma Elish* Tiamat had made the same promise to Qingu when she acclaimed him king of the gods in 1:153–58:

I make you the greatest in the assembly of the gods.
 Kingship of all the gods I put in your power.
 You are the greatest, my husband, you are illustrious,
 Your command shall always be greatest, over all the Anunna-gods.
 ...
 As for you, your command will not be changed, your utterance will endure.⁷⁵

Qingu's unchangeable command did not in fact endure: Like Tiamat, he died at the hand of Marduk. That the gods' guarantee of eternal power to Marduk is phrased in the same language as Tiamat's short-lived guarantee to Qingu suggests that we should read this sort of language with a grain of salt. This language is an exaggerated form of praise for whatever deity happened to be on the throne. As a result, we cannot be sure whether the fairly similar lines quoted above from the Book of Psalms are intended to posit an essential distinction between Yhwh and other gods.

Is it possible to distinguish between a monotheistic God who rules over the gods absolutely, on the one hand, and a polytheistic god who governs other gods without completely dominating them, on the other? One can imagine two models of divine kingship: a monotheistic one, in which members of a divine retinue praise the one God and carry out that God's wishes; and a polytheistic one, in which the king is first among equals, mightiest to be sure, but in control of the universe neither automatically nor permanently.⁷⁶ Conceptually, the difference between a monotheistic council and a pagan pantheon is clear: The divine retinue of the monotheistic god might be compared to the American cabinet, where secretaries of various departments carry out the president's policies and serve at the president's whim. The polytheistic pantheon resembles the British cabinet, where each minister may have an independent power base and in which all cabinet members, the prime minister included, may be dismissed at the whim of lower politicians in Parliament or (at least in theory) of a higher and more august, if otiose, authority.⁷⁷

On the basis of this distinction, it is clear that the pantheons of Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamia were polytheistic. Each had a high god, but none of their gods would be called supreme or all powerful in the monotheistic sense. Even the high god or goddess could be seriously challenged, and indeed kingship did pass from one god to another, sometimes peacefully (from Enlil and Anu to Marduk, as described in the preface to Hammurapi's code),⁷⁸ sometimes violently (from Baal to Mot and vice versa in the Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* or from Tiamat to Marduk in *Enuma Elish*). But what of the biblical material? Because the vocabulary describing the divine retinue known to us from the Hebrew Bible resembles language

depicting the pantheon of Canaanite religion, and because the Israelite conception grew out of the Canaanite, one may question whether Israelite religion is monotheistic.

Similarly skeptical reasoning may even apply to the following passages from Deuteronomy and Micah:

Take care – for this is a life-and-death point – . . . lest you look up to the heavens and, seeing the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole host of heaven, you allow yourselves to be seduced to bow down to them and worship them – those gods, whom Yhwh your God allotted to all the peoples under the heavens; Yhwh took you, on the other hand, and led you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, so that you belong to Him, as His private possession, to this very day . . . You have been shown; indeed you know: Yhwh is God; there is none other than Him.

(Deuteronomy 4.15,19–20,35)

When the Highest One gave the nations their possessions,
 When He divided humanity,
 He established the boundaries of nations
 In accordance with the number of the gods.⁷⁹
 But Yhwh's nation is His property,
 Jacob, His very own inheritance.

(Deuteronomy 32.8–9)

According to this conception, just as there were stereotypically seventy gods, so there were seventy nations,⁸⁰ each of which had its own god (this would have meant Ashur for the Assyrians, for example, and Marduk for the Babylonians, though Deuteronomy does not deign to mention these minor gods by name). But the high God Yhwh kept one nation as His own property, and it was their responsibility to pray only to Him.⁸¹ (The understanding of these verses I present here is hardly new; it was already set forth in detail in the twelfth century by Nachmanides in his commentary to Leviticus 18.25.⁸²)

The same idea underlies Micah 4.1–5. In the eschatological future that these verses imagine, individual nations still exist, and they still have conflicts with each other. These conflicts cannot be adjudicated by their own gods, who will not be impartial: Marduk would tend to side with Babylon and Ashur with Assyria, with warfare as the result (indeed, this is what happens in the preeschatological present). What will make the eschaton different is that all nations will acknowledge that Yhwh, the God dwelling on Mount Zion, is the ultimate authority, and they will travel there in order to receive judgments relating to international conflicts: “For legal ruling comes from Zion, and Yhwh's oracle from Jerusalem” (Micah 4.2b).⁸³ Because conflicts will be resolved by a Security Council located on Mount Zion with a membership of One and an unsurpassed ability to ensure compliance, there will be no need for warfare, and swords will be turned into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4.3). Even great nations will accept God's censure there

(Micah 4.2ab), and as a result it is clear that the entire world accepts the sovereignty of Yhwh in this eschatological future. But for Micah, the worldwide recognition of Yhwh does not mean that the gods of the nations are nonexistent, irrelevant, or unemployed: “For all the nations will take pride⁸⁴ in their own gods, but we will take pride in Yhwh, our God, forever” (Micah 4.5). Even in the eschaton, the other nations will relate primarily to their own gods, turning to Yhwh only when conflicts among them necessitate recourse to a higher authority. This passage from Micah makes especially clear the supreme position of Yhwh above other gods (as well as the unusually privileged place of Israel, which has the distinction of a personal relation to the supreme deity).⁸⁵

These passages from Deuteronomy and Micah strongly suggest a genuinely monotheistic worldview as defined above.⁸⁶ Whatever responsibilities the other gods have, they received them from Yhwh. In the event of conflict among various nations and hence among various gods, it is Yhwh who provides judgment. Ultimate power, in short, belongs exclusively to Yhwh.⁸⁷ Language as strong as this does not occur in Canaanite and Mesopotamian myth.⁸⁸ But it is at least imaginable that in a polytheistic system a high god would assign all the gods their responsibilities; indeed, in *Enuma Elish* 6:39–46, Marduk divides the gods into various groupings, and his ancestor Anshar proclaims Marduk the god whom the gods themselves must obey in 6:101–120. Thus the verses from Deuteronomy and Micah cannot on their own settle the issue.

Micah’s contemporary Isaiah imagined the future somewhat differently. In Isaiah’s vision of the eschaton, all nations, including even Israel’s archenemies, Assyria and Egypt, will have a direct covenantal relationship with the supreme deity; this is evident in Isaiah 19, especially verses 18–25, in which Isaiah describes Egypt’s relation with Yhwh using precisely the same language used in the Hebrew Bible to describe Israel’s relation with Yhwh. It is for this reason that Isaiah’s version of the prophecy found in Micah 2.1–5 does not include the final line concerning the ongoing relationship between the nations and their gods; see Isaiah 2.1–4. For Isaiah, the other gods are indeed irrelevant, and therefore he repeatedly calls them אֱלִילִים (no-gods); see Isaiah 2.8,18,20; 10.10,11; 19.1,3; 31.7.⁸⁹ Micah, in contrast, never uses this term. Isaiah’s perspective can, I think, genuinely be called monotheistic. But the question remains: Is Isaiah typical or exceptional within the Hebrew Bible? Can we find evidence of genuine monotheism throughout the Hebrew Bible, or is it limited to this one corpus and perhaps a few others?

*Strong Evidence for Biblical Monotheism: The Contribution
of Yehezkel Kaufmann*

The Bible’s descriptions of Yhwh’s incomparability, might, and kingship, we have seen, do not necessarily suffice to show that the Bible’s authors and redactors were monotheistic (the example of Isaiah notwithstanding; we must admit the possibility

that Isaiah's perspective is atypical of biblical literature on this point). Two sorts of evidence, however, can demonstrate the monotheism of these authors more generally: first, the consistent differences between biblical depictions of other gods and Canaanite and Mesopotamian depictions of gods, and second, the different ways these literatures describe the relationship of their high gods to the world. My reasoning in the next several paragraphs largely follows the still unsurpassed discussion of this issue by Yehezkel Kaufmann.⁹⁰

The divine retinue we know from the Hebrew Bible differs from those of Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Greek literature, because lower beings never successfully or even realistically challenge Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible. An enormous number of the texts describing relationships among the gods in those cultures narrate conflicts in which a high god is either seriously threatened or (more often) overthrown. At the beginning of the Akkadian *Atrahasis* epic, the lower ranking Igigi gods revolt against the higher ranking Anunnaki gods. The first half of *Enuma Elish* tells the stories of two successive revolts by younger gods against older ones. In the first, the primordial deity Apsu is killed, but his wife Tiamat survives, so that power is dispersed between the older deities led by Tiamat and younger ones led by Ea and his father Anu. In the second, an even younger god, Marduk, succeeds in killing his great-great-great-grandmother Tiamat and is acclaimed king by his fellow younger gods. The Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* describes the conflicts of a relatively young god, Baal, with his peers Yam (whom he kills) and Mot (at whose hands he dies, only to be brought back to life when his sister Anat kills Mot). In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Kronos violently usurps the kingship of his father Ouranos, only to be deposed by his own son Zeus.

Especially revealing in these texts are the scenes of fear and trembling in the councils of the gods. In *Atrahasis* 1:13–95, the lowly Igigi genuinely frighten mighty Enlil. The older and younger gods are terrified of each other in *Enuma Elish* (see 1:57–8; 2:5–6, 49–52; 3:125–9; 4:67–70, 87–90, 107–9). The same is true in Ugaritic literature. Yam's demands provoke real dismay at the council of El.⁹¹ As a result, these narratives intimate that the battles these gods and goddesses fight are real struggles; none of the deities involved knows the outcome in advance, because both sides have genuine power. The same can be said when deities join the fray in the *Iliad*; to whatever extent the ultimate result of the war was foreordained, it was because of a power greater than the gods and not because of the power any particular god displayed on the battlefield.

The divine council depicted in the Hebrew Bible is something else altogether. In Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6, the divine retinue exists to praise Yhwh, not to battle Him. In Genesis 1.26, they are informed, but not really consulted, regarding the creation of humanity.⁹² In 1 Kings 22, Isaiah 6, and Isaiah 40,⁹³ the retinue is called on to relay Yhwh's messages. It is significant that in these three last texts (and also in Zechariah 3) a human being sits in on the council's meeting – a circumstance that underscores the fact that humanity and the gods/angels are basically on the same subservient

level in Hebrew scripture, linked with each other in their ontological difference from Yhwh.⁹⁴ (This ontological similarity of humanity and the gods becomes apparent also in Psalm 8.6⁹⁵ and in Psalm 29.1–2, in which humans call out to the gods to praise Yhwh, just as humans call on each other to praise Yhwh in most psalms of praise.⁹⁶) To be sure, a member of the divine council even engages Yhwh in debate in Job 1, and Yhwh rebukes that same member of the council in Zechariah 3. But never do members of the court revolt against Yhwh or coerce Yhwh. Further, occasional humans also engage God in debate and even succeed in convincing (but not forcing) God to reconsider the divine plan – specifically, Abraham in Genesis 18 and Moses in several texts, including Exodus 32 and Numbers 14. Any one of the passages cited in this paragraph might not require a monotheistic interpretation on its own (with the exception, I think, of Genesis 1); it is possible that each describes a high god consulting with lower ranking peers rather than an ultimate power consulting with ontologically subservient beings. But the contrast between all these passages and a similar selection from Canaanite, Mesopotamian, or Greek literature is telling.⁹⁷ Even a large sample of the biblical literature fails to turn up any examples of genuine struggle on Yhwh’s part against those who rise up against Him.

To be sure, several texts do famously describe a conflict between Yhwh on the one hand and the Sea and his helpers on the other: the most famous examples include Isaiah 27.1, 51:9–11; Habakkuk 2.8–9; Psalm 74:13–15, 89:6–14; and Job 26:5–13. As many scholars note, these passages use terms that also appear in the Ugaritic myth in which Baal defeats Yam or Sea.⁹⁸ The biblical texts differ from their Ugaritic parallels, however, in crucial respects. They describe a doomed revolt against a deity who was already in charge, a revolt Yhwh puts down without any difficulty. These passages lack any real drama, for they convey no sense that Yhwh was required to engage in real exertion to suppress the insurrection. Baal and Marduk, Zeus and Kronos toil to attain an exalted status; Yhwh had that status to begin with and retains it with ease.⁹⁹ Further, several of these biblical texts downgrade the status of Sea from deity to object. The word *yam* can be a personal name, as it is in Ugaritic, where it refers to the god Yam (Sea), but it can also be a noun, simply meaning “the sea.” By prefacing the definite article to this word, Psalm 89.10 and Job 26.12 make clear that *yam* refers to an object, not to a person, because the definite article does not attach to personal names in Hebrew. The texts describing Yhwh’s conflict with the S/sea in Isaiah, Habakkuk, Psalms, and Job remind us of the older myth in order to make clear us precisely what story is *not* being told: to wit, a genuine theomachy.¹⁰⁰

In any of these biblical passages, it is difficult to imagine Yhwh, confronted by any other being, smiting his thigh and biting his lip, like Anshar in *Enuma Elish* when he hears of Tiamat’s war plans.¹⁰¹ Yhwh never feels threatened by a workers’ revolt to the point of bursting out in tears, like Enlil in *Atrahasis*.¹⁰² Nor can one imagine Yhwh being intimidated into agreeing to another being’s demand

by threat of violence against Yhwh,¹⁰³ in contrast to El in the Baal texts.¹⁰⁴ In sum, in spite of the similar language that describes Yhwh's council and various pagan pantheons,¹⁰⁵ their resemblance hardly shows that their respective theologies are identical. In almost no biblical texts is there any sense that Yhwh's authority, like Tiamat's or Enlil's, El's or Baal's, is contingent.¹⁰⁶

Nor are we told that Yhwh ascended at some point in time to the role He has throughout the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰⁷ It is important to stress this point, because without it one could formulate a facile argument that Yhwh is merely another high god like Marduk, Baal, or Zeus. From the point of view of the history of religions, Yhwh does resemble these high gods in that we can note that ancient texts attribute to Him powers, epithets, and areas of responsibility originally connected with other gods. Thus the biblical portrait of Yhwh combines imagery and titles that Canaanites had associated with two distinct gods, El and Baal,¹⁰⁸ just as *Enuma Elis* applies to Marduk imagery and titles associated with both Anu and Enlil.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, in Ugarit the relatively young god Baal takes over areas of responsibility originally belonging to his father Dagon and his predecessor El. Nevertheless, as the German scholar Erich Zenger points out, a crucial difference emerges when we compare these cases. The Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts tell us that the high god took over that role at some point in time, but Yhwh was the high god from the opening verses of the Hebrew Bible's narrative.¹¹⁰ In the Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts, the primary sources themselves tell us that the high god received another god's office; thus (to take one example) the opening lines in the prologue to Hammurapi's Laws announce that Anu and Enlil have raised up Marduk to leadership of the gods.¹¹¹ As a result, Babylonian texts can speak of Marduk (and, for that matter, Sin and Nabu and Ishtar and even temples of these deities) as possessing what they call "Enlil-status" and "Anu-status" (both of which are usually translated as "authority").¹¹² These texts openly describe one deity taking over the functions of another because from their point of view both gods exist, even if practically speaking Marduk is the one who primarily matters for the present. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, scholars have to work to notice how Israelites applied to Yhwh vocabulary once associated with other gods. The biblical texts themselves do not reveal this theological background because as far as they are concerned this theological background does not exist. The biblical texts' very failure to acknowledge the theological background provides evidence of their monotheism.

Kaufmann emphasizes a further difference between the gods of pagan religions and the position of Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹³ The pagan gods were created or born from something prior to them. Mighty Marduk is a child to Ea; Baal is Dagon's son. The earliest, ill-fated Mesopotamian gods of *Enuma Elish* arose from the mingling of sweet and salty waters (that is, of Apsu and Tiamat). All the gods to whom hymns and sacrifices are offered are younger than the world itself. The regnant gods never belong to one of the earlier generations of beings

who have entered the world. In *Enuma Elis*, Apsu and Tiamat give rise to Lahmu and Lahamu, who generate Anshar and Kishar; they beget Anu, whose son Ea kills his great-grandfather Apsu; and it is Ea's son Marduk who kills Tiamat to gain dominion over the cosmos. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Gaia (Earth) mates with her eldest son Ouranos (Sky) to produce the generation of Titans, of whom the youngest was Kronos; Kronos, plotting with his mother against his father, achieves dominion by castrating him; he then maintains control by eating his own children, the generation of the Olympians; his son Zeus is saved, however, and grows up to lead the Olympians in warfare against the Titans, whom Zeus eventually imprisons in Tartarus, whereupon he gains sovereignty. What is striking here is not only the recurring motif of conflict nor even the prevalence of patricidal and matricidal themes, but the youth of the gods who are described as currently holding power.¹¹⁴ The gods in charge of the world (including even a creator god like Marduk) are part of creation rather than older than it, for all these gods had a moment of origin; the world once existed without them. Similarly, the gods who had once been in charge have a moment of departure; the world now exists without them. But in Hebrew scripture, the world never exists without Yhwh. Of Yhwh's origins we know nothing. There are no stories of this deity's birth to another god or generation from earlier matter. Even though most biblical texts assume that matter existed before the creation of the world as we know it,¹¹⁵ we are never given reason to doubt Yhwh's control over matter, whether in its primordial form or as it now constitutes the universe.¹¹⁶

Kaufmann emphasizes the special importance of the relationship between Yhwh and matter, and, more broadly, between Yhwh and other forces in the universe.¹¹⁷ In polytheistic theologies, the gods are subject to matter and to forces stronger than themselves. The gods' power was great, but that power largely derived from their ability to manipulate matter through special techniques, especially the use of language and ritual. Thus Ea/Enki and Belet-ili use incantations to create humanity in *Atrahasis*.¹¹⁸ These same techniques, which are usually termed magic, are available to humanity as well. Of course, human beings' mastery of these techniques pales in comparison to that of the gods, but the difference is one of quantity rather than one of quality.

Consequently, we can say that in Mesopotamian religion, there exists a realm of power independent of, and greater than, the realm of divinity. It is for this reason that in some Mesopotamian texts, humans attempt to ward off evil without turning in any significant way to the gods. In texts such as the *Namburbi* rituals, it is the powers inherent in the stuff of the universe that humans attempt to control. In omen literature such as *Šumma izbu*, humans attempt to gain access to information about the future by attending to unusual events or by examining entrails of animals slaughtered for this purpose. Such information seems to be a part of the complex and intricately interconnected structure of the cosmos rather than information inscribed into the universe by the gods. A particular oddity might be present in the

liver of a calf not because a god put it there to warn humanity of a coming famine but because that particular oddity happened to correlate with crop failures for reasons beyond our understanding. The role of the gods, when they are mentioned in texts of this kind, is merely to aid the humans in accessing those powers, which transcend even the gods' realms but were better understood by the gods than by humans.¹¹⁹

The same idea is articulated more explicitly in classical Greek sources. A proverb cited by Herodotus states, "None may escape his destined lot (μοῖραν), not even a god."¹²⁰ Essentially the same proverb is quoted in Plato's *Laws* 5.741, which uses the term "necessity" (ἀνάγκη) rather than "destiny" or "fate" (μοῖρα). The character Prometheus states baldly in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* 515–20 that Zeus is less powerful than the three Fates (Μοῖραι) and the Furies (Ἐρινύες), who are the controllers of necessity (ἀνάγκης). Thus Walter Otto can assert,

Sometimes it is said that the gods "can do all things," but a glance at the stories of the gods shows that this is not to be taken literally. Their oneness with nature would of itself contradict their ability to do all things. In a desperate situation men do not hesitate to say that even the gods could be of no help. When Nestor expresses the wish that Telemachus may succeed, with Athena's help, in mastering the suitors, Telemachus answers: "I dare not let myself think of it. Even though the gods themselves willed it no such good fortune could befall me" [*Odyssey* 3:228]. However we may explain the impotence of the gods in these special cases, there is a fixed limit to their power, a basic "so far and no farther." . . . In the *Odyssey* Athena herself says: "Death is certain, and when a man's fate (Moirā) has come, not even the gods can save him, no matter how they may love him" [*Odyssey* 3:236] . . . [The gods] themselves sometimes avow that they are subject to destiny's decree. This decree is not only withdrawn from the gods' sphere of authority once and for all; it is essentially different from the functions of the gods.¹²¹

Fate when personified is usually associated with the pre-Olympians. Hesiod tells us (*Theogony* 217) that Fate is the daughter of Night,¹²² indicating that Fate is older than Zeus and the gods who are his siblings and children.¹²³ Like matter itself, then, Fate precedes the gods. The relationship is not completely straightforward; Hesiod also tells us that the fates can be described as Zeus' daughters (see *Theogony* 904), and Homer has Penelope claim that the immortals have appointed a fate for everything on earth (*Odyssey* 19:592). Penelope's comment suggests that the gods have some control over fate, at least where decrees regarding mundane matters are concerned.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, Hesiod and Homer do not contradict themselves in their varied portrayals of the complex relationship between the gods and fate; rather, they both acknowledge the great power of the gods, which can on occasion decree a fate, even as they make clear that ultimately the gods themselves are subject to its decrees and cannot overturn them even when their own favorites are concerned.¹²⁵

The Hebrew Bible presumes an entirely different sort of relationship between divinity and powers present in the cosmos. Yhwh's will is never frustrated by forces of nature, by matter, or by other gods. Only in one area can Yhwh be thwarted: by human free will.¹²⁶ This exception results from Yhwh's own decision to create beings with their own ability to choose for good and for ill. Yhwh's single limitation in the Hebrew Bible is self-imposed, but the limitations on the gods in polytheistic texts are often the result of forces beyond themselves. To be sure, Kaufmann may have overstated the undetermined nature of the divine will, but his thesis, slightly modified, can still stand. Although Yhwh is not subject to outside forces in the manner that Enlil and Baal are, Yhwh nonetheless is a person and thus subject to His own emotion. Consequently, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit modify Kaufmann's claim of Yhwh's irrevocable will. They point out that

the God of the Bible is free from nature and fate, but he is not free from emotional tendencies. In modern terms we would say that he is free of physics and biology, but not of psychology. . . . In recognizing that God is independent from the world in terms of nature and fate, Kaufmann discovered a deep and important distinction between paganism and the monotheistic religions There is, however, an emotional interdependency that involves God in a complex relationship with the world This dependency is not a causal subjection like the subjection of the gods to nature and fate in myth, and so Kaufmann's significant distinction remains intact.¹²⁷

The Hebrew Bible's distinctive account of the relationship between divinity and powers inhering in the cosmos stands behind its rejection of the entire category of magic. The nature of this rejection needs to be carefully described, however, if we are to avoid misunderstanding it. The authors of the Hebrew Bible did not regard magic as nonsense. Like everyone else in the ancient world, these authors believed that magic was real: Human beings could use specific language and particular behaviors to gain access to powers inhering in the universe. The biblical authors believed that these powers were limited, however, because Yhwh was in no way subject to them. (Contrast the devastating effect of incantations on Tiamat or Qingu in *Enuma Elish*.¹²⁸) Consequently, biblical authors rejected magic in one specific and limited sense: They insisted that followers of Yhwh should not use it (for example, in Exodus 22.17 and Deuteronomy 18.10), not because magic did not work, but because using magic was an act of disloyalty toward the God whose power outshone it.¹²⁹ Examples of magical practices among followers of Yhwh, it follows, are not from the biblical point of view indications of polytheism; they are rather indications of sin. (Similarly, an Israelite or a Jew might eat pork, but this does not demonstrate that this person is a polytheist; rather, he or she may be a monotheist who is missing the mark.)

One final contrast between genuine polytheistic literature and the Hebrew Bible is arresting. Although the Hebrew Bible mentions the existence of other gods, those other gods never appear in biblical narrative as independent actors.¹³⁰ The

gods of other nations may be real; their authority over those nations, according to texts like Deuteronomy 4.19–20 and 32.8–9, is genuine. But these gods are never sufficiently important to appear as characters with their own names.¹³¹ It is within the realm of the imaginable that Moab's Kemosh is one of the members of the divine council portrayed in 2 Kings 22 or that Assyria's Ashur is among those called on to shout out Yhwh's praises in Psalm 29. Nevertheless, the biblical text portrays them only as part of an anonymous mass. Never do other nation's deities interact with Yhwh or contact human beings on their own in biblical narrative. Even the few apparent exceptions to this rule are instructive: Kemosh is described as a real actor twice, in Numbers 21.29 and Judges 11.24. In both cases, it is not the biblical narrator who speaks; rather, Israelite characters in the narrative mention this foreign god when addressing a foreign audience (in the former, anonymous bards address the Moabites; in the latter, Jephthah addresses the Ammonites).¹³² 2 Kings 3.27 is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to acknowledging real power from another god; even this verse, which describes a rite of child sacrifice performed by a Moabite king, does not give the name of the god and does not state that it was that god who dictated the final outcome of the events. One of the crucial texts that acknowledges the existence of these beings, Deuteronomy 4, not only refuses to give us their names but refrains from applying the term "god" to them at all, so that these beings are removed from the realm of the sacred or numinous and are reduced, as Georg Braulik notes, to mere secular or profane beings.¹³³ The single exception, Braulik rightly notes, in Deuteronomy 4.28 in fact proves the rule that applies to this chapter: That verse refers to "gods made by human hands . . . who cannot see or hear or eat or smell."

What I have constructed in this section may be regarded as an argument from silence: It is the absence of several crucial elements found in the polytheistic religions of Israel's neighbors that leads me to conclude that the Hebrew Bible exemplifies monotheism and not merely monolatry. In regard to any one text, such an argument lacks validity. We cannot say definitively that Exodus 15.11, or Exodus 20.2–3, or Psalm 96, on its own, is a monotheistic text. But when we examine a wide variety of biblical texts from several different genres (narrative, law, prophecy, prayer), the consistent omission of polytheistic themes is indeed revealing, and in such a case an argument from silence is legitimate. Here a caveat is necessary: We cannot enter the head of every Israelite who uttered or heard these texts. Were there worshippers of Yhwh who understood some of these texts in a manner we can term polytheistic monolatry or even garden-variety (non-monolatrous) polytheism? Is it possible that the first Israelite to have composed or uttered one of these lines intended the passage such a way? No doubt the answer to these questions is yes. Some texts within the Hebrew Bible can be understood in a polytheistic fashion if one so chooses. But the fact that the Hebrew Bible as a whole fails to attest any examples that must be read in a polytheistic fashion justifies the conclusion that this anthology is indeed a monotheistic one.

MONOTHEISM, POLYTHEISM, AND OTHER POLARITIES

In spite of the similarities of language, poetic style, narrative structure, and ritual program so manifest between biblical documents and other ancient Near Eastern texts, a scholar who attends to large amounts of texts from both sets of cultures cannot but be struck by the failure of the former to display a host of motifs repeatedly present in the latter. Moreover, it is precisely the strong similarities between these corpora that make the absence so striking. The motifs in question center around the issue of how the cosmos and its powers relate to divinity. Attending to these motifs, we can identify two types of thinking in these bodies of literature. In one, which may be termed polytheism and is present in the vast majority of ancient Near Eastern texts, divinity is subject to the cosmos and its powers, even if it excels at manipulating those powers. In the other type of thinking, which may be termed monotheism and is present in biblical texts, divinity is not subject to the cosmos and its powers, except when divinity voluntarily limits its might to allow freedom of action for some of the creatures it has fashioned.

The crucial question addressed here, then, is one of distinction: Are there respects in which the Hebrew Bible differs fundamentally from its environment? Biblical scholars in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century tended strongly to stress discontinuities between Israel and its surrounding cultures, and this overpronounced tendency left subsequent scholars wary of this question, but a past obsession with this theme need not lead us to slight its importance. Biblical religion does in fact distinguish itself from other religions of the ancient Near East in its perception of one God as the exclusive creator of a world over which that God has complete control. It is precisely for this reason that we should take note of the striking similarities in the concept of divine embodiment and divine selfhood between Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts and parts of the Hebrew Bible, similarities that span the border separating the former from the latter.

At the same time, noting an element that distinguishes biblical religion from the religions of Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamia should not blind us to other possible distinctions, which we might miss if we simply lump Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamian religion under the broad category "polytheism." It is just as important to ask what (if anything) makes a given polytheistic religion distinctive, what elements link certain polytheistic religions to each other and not to others, or what elements link a polytheistic religion and a monotheistic one. For example, one might argue that Canaanite and Sumerian polytheisms share significant features that are largely lacking in Assyrian and Babylonian religions; these include a stress on fertility and repetition, and the vulnerability or even mortality present in the realm of the divine. (I venture to suggest, in fact, that Canaanite and Sumerian religions are deeply Eliadian, whereas Assyrian and Babylonian religions are considerably less so.)

A major concern of this book has been to note what we might term theological isoglosses (that is, sets of shared elements linking some theologies together in contrast to others) that defy the basic polarity between monotheism and polytheism. On one side of the divide that has concerned us stand Greek polytheism and the various monotheisms of ancient Israel's priestly and deuteronomic schools, of medieval Jewish philosophy, and perhaps of Protestant Christianity. On the other side, the polytheisms of Mesopotamia and of the Northwest Semites stand alongside the monotheisms of some Israelites (especially those reflected in J and E texts), of various forms of kabbalah, and perhaps of Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity.

In this appendix I have attempted to show that the term "monotheism" can be meaningfully employed in discussing Israelite religion: This term has explanatory power that helps us see how Israelite and especially biblical religion differs crucially from its environment. Nevertheless, this book as a whole also suggests that the polarity between monotheism and polytheism is of less explanatory value than many students of religion have tended to suppose, or at least that it can obscure connections of great interest that cross over that division.¹³⁴ It is meaningful to note that a kabbalist in the thirteenth century C.E. is a monotheist, whereas a worshipper of Marduk in the early first millennium B.C.E. is a polytheist – but it is also meaningful, and perhaps much more revealing, to note that they are much closer to each other in their understanding of the nature of divinity than they are to many other monotheists and polytheists, respectively. As much as this work argues that the terms "monotheist" and "polytheist" are useful starting places for a historian of religion, it also shows that they are no more than that.¹³⁵

Notes

INTRODUCTION: GOD'S BODY AND THE BIBLE'S INTERPRETERS

1. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:229–31.
2. A number of scholars have noted that from the biblical point of view, the term “anthropomorphism” renders this conception precisely backward. For the author of Genesis 1.26–7 (and for later commentators committed to its understanding of God), it is appropriate instead to say that God has rendered humanity theomorphic. See Rosenzweig, “Anthropomorphismus,” 528; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:145; and Lorberbaum, *Image*, 18, 101–4.
3. Lorberbaum coins this phrase to sum up Kaufmann’s understanding; see Lorberbaum, *Image*, 88. On the possibility of a “spiritual or noncorporeal anthropomorphism,” see further Stern, *Midrash*, 78. Stern finds this phenomenon in Gnostic texts, but the term sums up the view in many texts from the Hebrew Bible as well.
4. On the lethal nature of the divine presence, both in ritual contexts involving priests and theophanic contexts involving prophets, see the comprehensive discussion, with helpful bibliography, in Savran, *Encountering*, 190–3; on the surprising exceptions to this tendency, see his discussion in 193–203.
5. Quite a few biblical authors and characters express either surprise that humans saw God but did not die or fear that having seen God, they would die; see Genesis 32.31, the particularly impressive case in Exodus 24.10–11, Judges 6.22–3, Judges 13.22, Isaiah 6.1–5; also perhaps Genesis 16.13, according to the likely emendation (הגם אלהים ראיתי) suggested by Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, 1.64–5.
6. On Abraham’s initial failure to realize that his visitors include Yhwh, see Skinner, *Genesis*, 299–300, and Kugel, *God of Old*, 11–13. On the vocalization of the word אֲדֹנָי in Genesis 18.3, see n.9 in Chapter 2.
7. Elsewhere the same collection of material (the Pentateuch’s E source) tells us that Moses, in contrast to other prophets, gazes directly at God’s precise form (Numbers 12.8); other prophets see God only as though in a mirror (Numbers 12.6). Here, one should recall that ancient mirrors were made of burnished bronze and gave a small, blurry, and reddish reflection.
8. It is noteworthy that this brief chapter uses all the technical terms that Israelite religion knows for God’s manifestation: *kabod* (Exodus 33.18, 22), *shem* (verses 12, 17), and *panim* (verses 11, 14, 23). Other characteristics of God occur as well: *tub* (verse 19) and *derekh* (verse 13).
9. For another example of this method of editing, in which theme and debate rather than plot provide the guiding principle, see Sommer, “Reflecting.”
10. Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, e.g., 50–61, 108–10, 138–51, 198–205, 215–53, 258–62, 274–81.

11. *Ibid.*, 261.
12. Scarry, *Body*, 210.
13. *Ibid.*, 192.
14. Scarry insists, but never argues, that “as God in the scene of hurt is a bodiless voice, so men and women are voiceless bodies” (Scarry, *Body*, 200). This assertion sounds fascinating, but the Hebrew Bible repeatedly contradicts it. Human bodies in pain do not lose their voice in biblical narrative, poetry, prophecy, or wisdom. The lament, the complaint to God, and the cry of woe are among the most pervasive genres of biblical literature. No fewer than 60 of the 150 psalms are classified as “complaints,” and complaints appear often in other books as well, including but not limited to the Book of Lamentations. (Regarding the Psalter, I follow the classification of Fohrer and Sellin, *Einleitung*, 308–18; cf. 287–9. Counts by other scholars differ in details, but yield similar numbers.) Biblical narratives often present laments and complaints as effective in goading God to change His behavior (e.g., Hannah in 1 Samuel 1; Moses in Exodus 32, Numbers 11, and elsewhere; the children of Israel in Exodus 2.24, 3.7, and 6.5). Even when these laments are not effective (Jeremiah; David in 2 Samuel 12), the fact that they are recorded in detail demonstrates that in the Hebrew Bible the suffering human has, if nothing else, an enduring voice. To be sure, there are times when God directs a human to silence his voice (e.g., Jeremiah 7.16, 11.14, 14.11); on one occasion, the overwhelming nature of God’s self-manifestation stifles a complaint (Job 42.1–6). But these cases are noteworthy precisely because they are so exceptional in the Hebrew Bible. Further, one can wonder whether God can be said to rob the suffering Job or Jeremiah of their voices; after all, Job is silenced only after he is allowed some thirty chapters to give voice to his bewilderment, anger, and pain, whereas Jeremiah’s laments on his and his people’s behalf are found throughout the book bearing his name. Had Scarry consulted any secondary literature on the Bible, she would surely have come across these basic facts, but she seems to be completely unaware of, or unconcerned with, the existence of scholarly writing on the Bible. Concerning the important role of complaint in the Psalter, see Balentine, *Hidden God*. On the central role of what might be called the trope of dissent in the Hebrew Bible, see Blank, “Men”; Crenshaw, “Human Dilemma”; and more recently Brueggemann, *Theology*, 317–564.
15. Scarry, *Body*, 360 n.23.
16. *Ibid.*, 235–6.
17. According to Moshe Weinfeld, there is one exception to this statement. Weinfeld maintains that the exilic prophet responsible for Isaiah 40–66 denied that God had a body, and thus Deutero-Isaiah was the single Israelite forebear of the view that became standard in Judaism after the era of Maimonides. See Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 124–5. This article is a pathbreaking treatment of inner biblical polemic, and Weinfeld amply proves his thesis – to wit, that Deutero-Isaiah argues against the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1.1–2.4a. But his assertion that Isaiah 40.18, 40.25, and 46.5 show that Deutero-Isaiah did not believe that God has a body is belied by other passages in Isaiah 40–66, and other readings of those three verses are possible. See my forthcoming article, Sommer, “Did Deutero-Isaiah Believe.”
18. Throughout her treatment of biblical texts, she contrasts the distant deity of the Old Testament with the more compassionate and nearby God of the New. For a disturbing example, see her discussion of God’s mode of relating to humanity in Scarry, *Body*, 212–15: In the Old Testament, Scarry claims, God relates to human beings by wounding

- them; in the New, God relates by healing them. The selectivity of this caricature is breathtaking. One could just as easily choose verses to make precisely the opposite point – for example, that the New Testament’s deity is a God of wrath and fiery justice (see Matthew 13.36–50; Luke 12.49–51; Revelations 16.1–21), whereas the Hebrew Bible’s deity is a God of mercy and forgiveness even to sinners (see Deuteronomy 5.30–1) – indeed, even to those who deserve no forgiveness at all (see Hosea 11.1–11).
19. See my discussion of Eichrodt in Sommer, “Dialogical,” 4–9, 18–19, with further references there.
 20. See Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:104–6. For Eichrodt, the ultimate triumph of pure Yhwhism was achieved by Jesus Christ, who decisively and permanently replaces the Jerusalem temple (1:107, with reference to Matthew 12.6). The irony in this view, which Eichrodt does not seem to recognize, is noteworthy: The final victory over Canaanite paganism according to Eichrodt consists of the arrival of a dying-and-rising god who takes human form.
 21. *Ibid.*, 1:211.
 22. *Ibid.*, 1:212–13.
 23. Cf. his comment that the prophets “go on presenting the trans-physical in physically conceivable forms as the old sagas had done” (*Ibid.*, 1:216) – another attempt to attribute to the prophets what they never state: to wit, God is transphysical. A further effort to play down the corporeality he cannot deny is found at 2:21.
 24. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 283.
 25. *Ibid.*, 283.
 26. *Ibid.*, 286, 570, 655, 671, and note the similar move in the discussion of the *kapporet* on 666.
 27. *Ibid.*, 302.
 28. Haran, *Temples*, 149–204, 246–59.
 29. Haran, “Divine Presence,” 257.
 30. Rimon Kasher, “Anthropomorphism.”
 31. For example, according to Ezekiel’s law code, no human being can ever go into the holy of holies, where God resides, in contrast to the legislation in Leviticus, where the High Priest can enter, protected by a cloud of incense, one day a year, for a solemn purification ritual. In Ezekiel, this purification must be performed outside the holy of holies (Rimon Kasher, “Anthropomorphism,” 364–8). Similarly, the priestly texts in Numbers require various types of people to keep specific distances away from the holy of holies. According to Ezekiel, everyone is kept at a further remove: For example, Israelites cannot be in the courtyard, and foreigners cannot be in the temple area at all (p. 368). In these respects, Ezekiel takes God’s dangerously embodied presence even more seriously than the priestly authors of the Pentateuch.
 32. Rimon Kasher, “Anthropomorphism,” 372–3.
 33. See Harvey, “Question,” 63–9, and Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 110. For a harsh critique of Maimonides’ view on corporeality as fundamentally non-Jewish, see Wyschogrod, *Body*, xiv–xv, as well as the critique by Maimonides’ contemporary, Abraham of Posquières (in his glosses on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Hammadda*’, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3.7), on which see Harvey, 69–74.
 34. On the anthropomorphic conception of God in rabbinic literature, see especially Goshen-Gottstein, “Body,” and Lorberbaum, *Image*, 14–22, 292–335. David Aaron criticizes several aspects of Goshen-Gottstein’s presentation in Aaron, “Shedding Light.” He

takes issue especially with Goshen-Gottstein's attempt to relate apparently contradictory discussions of the divine body to each other. Goshen's fundamental insights, however, remain valid: The rabbis never articulated a concept of a spiritual or noncorporeal God, and God's body seems to have consisted of or emanated an extraordinary light. To be sure, some passages in rabbinic literature have been read as objecting to anthropomorphic depictions of God, but a closer examination shows that these passages are concerned not with the metaphysical problem of attributing a form to God, but with the practical or ethical appropriateness of the humble forms sometimes attributed to Him. Further, rather than objecting to such attributions, the rabbis set out to justify them. See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 62–6.

Various rabbis debate whether exceptional human beings can see God. The view that humans can do so is associated with Rabbi Akiva and his school, whereas the opposite view is associated with Rabbi Ishmael and his school; see the collection of sources and discussion in Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 1:262–97 (=Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 299–320). Even the view that humans never see God, one should note, does not deny that God has a body; rather, those who hold this view insist that its extraordinary luminosity renders it impossible for humans to see it. See, e.g., *Sifre* 255, which assumes the existence of a divine body that is as real as (and much brighter than) the sun.

On anthropomorphic conceptions of God in rabbinic and related literature, see further Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 34–5, who notes that the speculations about God's body in the *shi'ur qomah* literature “were at the very center of rabbinic Judaism in tannaitic and talmudic times” and their gnosis “is a strictly orthodox Jewish one.” On early Christian claims that Jews of late antiquity regarded God as embodied, see Stroumsa, “Form(s),” 270–2, who regards these claims as accurate.

35. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 27–78. The same point is made in passing by Gruenwald, “God the Stone,” 448.
36. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 17, 27–8. For another fine discussion on this issue, especially as it relates to our understanding of biblical language concerning God's presence at the ark (אֲרוֹן), see Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 157–79. On the question of figurative and nonfigurative language in relation to God in the Hebrew Bible, see also Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 17–20 and 81–2. On the literal reading of biblical metaphors related to embodiment, see also the suggestive comments of Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 35–6.
37. On the interpretive strategy I am adopting (to wit, my decision not to see all anthropomorphic or mythopoetic language in scripture as necessarily and inevitably metaphorical), see the important programmatic remarks of Gruenwald, “God the Stone,” 429–34, especially 430–1, and Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 16–22, 81–2.
38. Also known by its first words as אֲנֵשִׁים וּמִירוּחַ. The text appears in most traditional Jewish prayerbooks at the end of the *Musaf* service and in others in the preliminary service immediately before the psalm for the day.
39. My reading of “The Hymn of Glory” is influenced by the sensitive treatment of Deutero-Isaiah's figurative language in Brettler, “Incompatible.”
40. As noted by Gruenwald, “God the Stone,” 441.
41. As Kugel, *God of Old*, 106–7, astutely notes, Yhwh

was not to be represented in an image, *not* because He did not have a body . . . , and not because He could not be seen by people. On the contrary: perhaps making an image of Him was forbidden precisely because the fact of His *appearing* among human beings . . . was . . . such a crucial

item So there were to be no cultic statues; there was only an empty space, a designated area. There God could appear and be “seen” in a privileged moment, but not through an image, not in anything solid The best we can do is designate a special space for Him to appear in, *a space that looks empty to the ordinary observer*.

From all this, it emerges that the biblical rationale for the prohibition of images is very different from philosophical rationales for this prohibition in later Judaism. For Maimonides, forging physical images of God represented a mistake or an illusion; it would constitute an attempt to portray physically something that has no physical existence. For biblical authors, on the other hand, doing so would be a sin, because it has the potential to diminish God’s dignity. See further Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 45–7, who point out that, for Maimonides, representing God is erroneous, whereas for biblical texts, representing God is inappropriate, which is a very different thing.

42. Morton Smith, “Shape,” 320.
43. Muffs, *Personhood*, 31.
44. Mark Smith, *Origins*, 87–8; the quotation is from 88. Smith cites Hendel, “Aniconism,” 207–8.
45. See the nuanced treatment in Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:221–44, who would emphasize not that God has a material body but that God has a particular shape and thus has a spatial dimension. For a biblical theologian who discusses anthropomorphism without evasion, see von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:145, 219, 237, 287, 366. Von Rad does not focus on this issue, but unhesitatingly acknowledges God’s physicality in passing several times. For another biblical theologian who approaches this issue without evasion, see especially the careful distinctions made by Barr, “Theophany,” 31–8, especially 32–3. For a sound judgment based on a heavily philological approach, see the very clear and straightforward statement in Garr, *Image*, 5–6. For a bold interpretation of the reason later Jews reinterpreted the ban on images of God as entailing the denial of divine embodiment, see Eilberg-Schwartz, *God’s Phallus*, 1, 8–9, 110–33.

1: FLUIDITY OF DIVINE EMBODIMENT AND SELFHOOD: MESOPOTAMIA AND CANAAN

1. On the close linkage between the concepts of body and self, see, e.g., Penelhum, “Personal,” 103–4. To have a self, in the eyes of many thinkers, is to have a body. Even thinkers who reject this view tend to frame their discussions of the self in relation to their understanding of the body. The reasons for the link between body and self are clear. A body, generally speaking, is distinct from other bodies; it has boundaries that allow it to be identified in relation to and in contrast from other bodies. (On this aspect of embodiment in relation to selfhood, see Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 37.) Similarly, a self has some sort of boundary that allows the self and others to perceive the distinction between the self and the others. Of course, this parallel can seem problematic even when one speaks of humans, but in the divine realm the parallel is even more complex, because a god’s body and self are not encumbered by the constraints that limit a human body or self. It is for this reason that the parallel between a god’s body and self demands the closer attention I give it here.
2. A related question, which is beyond the scope of this book, is how these cultures viewed human selfhood after a body decomposed. This issue is a major concern of some ancient texts, especially the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat. Tvzi Abusch points out that in ancient Near

Eastern religions “the soul of the individual after death . . . gradually loses individuality until it becomes part of the collectivity of the ancestors” (Abusch, “Ghost and God,” 372). When we recall that dead ancestors in Northwest Semitic and some Mesopotamian belief systems were deified, it follows from Abusch’s observation that the human self’s boundaries begin to fray precisely when the human being, having died, becomes a divine being. This finding is consonant with the thesis I present here.

3. For the view of the gods as humans writ large, differing significantly in their superiority but not their characters or temperaments, see Bottéro, *Religion*, 64–6, and cf. 58–61.

The locus classicus for this view (to wit, that according to Mesopotamian thinking humans and deities are ontologically the same, made of the same sort of stuff) might be found in the opening lines of *Atraḥasis*, whether we translate them, “When the gods were human, they bore the load . . .” (translation A) or “When the gods, like humans, bore the load . . .” (translation B). The equation between the gods and humanity may be a metaphor (translation A), or it may be a simile (translation B); it may even be taken quite literally (perhaps a possibility for translation A here, and even more so if we translate it as, “When the god-man bore the load . . .” [translation C]). In all of these cases, the text informs us that the very reason for humanity’s existence is to take over particularly onerous responsibilities performed by gods, and thus the text points to an essential continuity between humanity and divinity. That this continuity is stressed most strongly in A and C does not undermine the fact that it is present in B as well. For the argument that *Atraḥasis* narrates the breakdown of the primordial unity of divinity and humanity, which is replaced by a radical distinction between them (a reading that accords well with my own thesis), see Geller, “Sound and Word Plays,” esp. 67–8.

4. Translation from James B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 534, 538–9. In both the list of witnesses and the curses, the planet Venus is regarded as a deity: The name is written with the DINGIR prefix both in the god list and in the curses (^d*Šerua* in the former [line 29 of the treaty], ^d*Dilbat* in the latter [line 428]). For the Akkadian text (with another English translation), see Parpola and Watanabe, *Treaties*, 28–58.
5. James B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 533. Cf. Parpola and Watanabe, *Treaties*, 13.
6. Translation from Livingstone, *Court Poetry*, 10–12; I lay out the poetic lines (which Livingstone left unlineated) for greater readability and easier reference.
7. Livingstone, *Court Poetry*, 13; lineation added.
8. See Kinsley, “Avatāra,” 14.
9. Abusch, “Ishtar,” 453. On the coherence of Ishtar’s personality, see also Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 67–9.
10. On the Sumerian and Akkadian tales of the descent of Inanna/Ishtar as a fertility myth, see especially Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 61–2, and Jacobsen, *Harps*, 205.
11. See especially the analysis of this scene in Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal.”
12. Similarly, Kinsley, “Avatāra,” 14, notes that “historically, the different *avatāras* of Viṣṇu often appear to represent regional, sectarian, or tribal deities who have been subsumed by established Hinduism under the rubric of one of Viṣṇu’s many forms.”
13. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:632.
14. *Ibid.*, 2:605. For a discussion of these two texts, see especially Porter, “Anxiety,” 248–54.
15. See, e.g., Lambert, “Historical Development,” 198, and the useful survey provided by Porter, “Anxiety,” 214–18, 228–9, 240–3, 252–4. Simo Parpola attempts to argue for monotheism centered around Ashur in Assyria (see, e.g., his essay, Parpola,

- “Monotheism”), but this attempt is not successful. See the critique provided by Porter and also the review article of Parpola’s work by Jerrold Cooper, “Assyrian Prophecy.” Concerning the possibility that monotheism is found in various ancient Near Eastern cultures, see further Machinist, “Question of Distinctiveness,” 196–201, and the careful review of sources in Hartmann, “Monotheismus.”
16. See Hartmann, “Monotheismus,” 67–79; Porter, “Anxiety,” 217, 251, 253–4; against seeing these texts as evincing monotheism, see also Bottéro, *Religion*, 57–8. Hartmann (78–9) and Porter (251, 254) both acknowledge that for various individuals in Mesopotamia there were moments of intense focus on a particular god, but these moments did not lead to an ongoing rejection of other gods’ cults. Pettinato, “Polytheismus,” 46, suggests that the religion of Ebla may display a move toward henotheism, but he makes clear the thoroughly polytheistic nature of Eblaite religion (45), and he makes no claim that some circles in Ebla tended to worship only one god. Rather, he suggests that there were terms that referred to the realm of divinity generally and almost abstractly, not that any one god was the exclusive focus of worship. On the question of monotheism and monolatry in Akhenaton’s religious reform in Egypt, see Allen, “Monotheism,” and further references there.
 17. Translation from Dalley, *Myths*, 249. Cf. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:371.
 18. For the Akkadian, see Talon, *Enuma Eliš*, 51.
 19. See Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:400 n.2.
 20. See Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:400 n.4, where Foster further notes that the number fifty is assigned to Marduk in *Enuma Elish* 1.104 as well.
 21. Translation from Dalley, *Myths*, 273. Cf. the remark in Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:399 n.2.
 22. What I describe here is distinct from the tendency evident earlier in Tablet 7, in which various divine names are explained as belonging to Marduk (for example, the storm god Adad in 7:119–22). Those cases are genuine instances of syncretism: The poem does not see Adad as a divine person whose self temporarily overlaps with Marduk; rather, the poem sees Adad as another name for Marduk. The fact that historians working on a diachronic level can identify a separate god Adad of Northwest Semitic provenance should not obscure the fact that within this poem at a synchronic level Adad and Marduk are the same person, and hence that particular equation is not relevant to the argument I am presenting here.
 23. Thus, in the opening lines of the epic, the nonexistence of the world is narrated with the statement that no things had yet been named: “When on high no name was given to heaven / Nor below was the netherworld called by name When no gods at all had been brought forth, / None called by names, none destinies ordained” (1:1–2, 7–8; translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1.354). On the essentialist significance of naming in ancient Near Eastern literature generally, see McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 67–79. McBride describes what he calls “nominal realism” in ancient Near Eastern thinking, to wit, the belief in “a concrete, ontological relationship . . . between words and the things and actions which the words describe. A name is consubstantial with the thing named” (67).
 24. Translation from Dalley, *Myths*, 248.
 25. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:386.
 26. The line differs in various tablets of *Enuma Elish*. The Akkadian text given in most modern editions is *ana^d Marduk^d Enlil^d Ea bītašu ukinnū šubtam*; see Langdon, *Babylonian*

Epic, 172 (where the line is termed 48^b); Labat, *Création*, 148; and Weinfeld, *Babylonian*, 67, whose transliteration follows the cuneiform edition of Lambert, *Enuma Eliš*, 36. Some tablets, however, list the first god as Anu rather than Marduk, and in one Anu is listed second and the first is illegible; see the textual apparatus in Talon, *Enuma Eliš*, 64. The reading in which Anu appears rather than Marduk (*ana* ^dAnu ^dEnlil ^dEa *bītašu ukinnū šbtam*) lies behind the translations of Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:386, W. G. Lambert in Hecker et al., *Mythen*, III:4:593, and of Dalley, *Myths*, 262. Dalley, however, regards the names as referring to three deities and adds the adverb “likewise” to make this reading smoother: “They founded a dwelling for Anu, Ellil, and Ea likewise.” However, the text speaks of only one dwelling, and the context makes it clear that it belongs to Marduk; the notion that it suddenly refers to a second dwelling shared by three other gods is unlikely. Talon’s composite edition gives another text altogether – *ana* ^dAnu ^dEnlil ^dEa *u šāšu ukinnū šbtu* – which Talon translates, “et assurèrent une résidence pour Anu, Enlil, Ea et Lui-même”; this text also lies behind the translation of Klein and Shifra, *Distant*, 42. According to this construction of the text, line 64 refers to a temple shared by four gods, though the absence of Anu from the rest of this passage and of Enlil from the epic’s plot altogether renders the sudden reference to the building of a house for these four discrete gods rather odd. In any event, the other tablets on which Langdon, Labat, and Lambert/Weinfeld based their editions support the reading given here.

27. Contra the paraphrase attempted in the translation in Weinfeld, *Babylonian*, 38. Note that there is no copula in the text, and (more important) the pronominal suffix on the noun is unambiguously singular. One tablet does, atypically, contain a copula between the second and third divine names (see the textual notes in Talon, *Enuma Eliš*, 64), but the pronoun remains singular. Langdon, *Babylonian Epic*, 173 n.8, hesitantly suggests translating *ana* ^dMarduk ^dEnlil ^dEa *bītašu ukinnū šbtam* as “Enlil and Ea established for Marduk his house.” This suggestion is extremely unlikely, because it is clearly all the gods who are building the house in this passage; Ea does not otherwise appear in the passage, and Enlil does not appear in the epic at all, so their sudden presence as builders in this line would be a non sequitur. See further the argument of Moran, “New Fragment,” 3:263–4: “As both the suffix on the noun and the entire context make perfectly clear, for Marduk alone is a temple built and, therefore, there is no escaping that Enlil and Ea stand in apposition to Marduk.” Some translators have suggested translating *bītašu* as “an abode therein” or “an abode in it”; see Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 48; Speiser in Pritchard, *ANET*, 60; and Ebeling, *Weltschöpfungslied*, 59. All three of these translators mark the translation as uncertain. Against the impossible translation suggested by Heidel, Pritchard, and Ebeling, see the remark in Moran, “New Fragment,” 263.
28. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:386.
29. For the Akkadian text of K. 252, see Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*, 2:T113–T125.
30. In the cuneiform text, these are written as ^dBE for Ea (where the word BE is a Sumerian word standing for the name of the god Ea), ^dA-*num* for Anu, ^dUTU for Shamash (UTU is the Sumerian name for god Shamash), and ^dSIN for the moon-god Sin. (Here and elsewhere I put any Sumerian word written with a single symbol [or logogram] in the cuneiform texts in uppercase letters to distinguish such words from Akkadian words in those same texts, which I put in italics.)

31. These are spelled ^d*Da-gan Aš-šur* (for Dagan-Ashur), I:14, ^d*Lah̄-mu*^{MES} *Aš-šur* DI.KU₅^{MES} (the-gods-Ashur-the-divine-judges, I:16), and ^dNIN.GAL *Aš-šur* (Ningal-Ashur, V:174).
32. Porter, “Anxiety,” 230.
33. *Ibid.*, 237, 239.
34. The question of how one might describe the relationship among divine selves in strictly Western philosophical or linguistic categories is beyond the scope of this study. For a suggestive model that is sensitive to the nature of biblical rhetoric (which is to say, a type of ancient Near Eastern rhetoric), see the discussion of conceptual ascription in Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 59–60. Aaron notes the limitations of discussions that recognize only literal and metaphorical statements and points out that it is also possible to equate two things literally without insisting on their ontological identity. We shall see later (nn. 56 and 68) that this puts the matter rather too strongly, but Aaron’s approach represents a new direction that avoids imposing Western categories on the ancient Near Eastern texts (cf. his remarks on p. 146).
35. Porter, “Anxiety,” 246, 248.
36. Cf. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 46: “The Greeks of the archaic period, in order to conceive of a being of whatever kind, had no alternative but to express that being within the framework of the body’s vocabulary, even though it meant skewing this code through procedures of distortion and denial, contradicting it at the very moment they used it.”
37. The standard edition of these texts is Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*. Translations of several of these texts are provided (some with the Akkadian in normalized format), along with a description of the ritual and its history, in Walker and Dick, “Induction.” Several of these texts are also available in transliteration with translation in Berlejung, *Theologie*, 422–3. A very helpful description and interpretation of these ceremonies are found in Berlejung, “Washing.” See further the sensitive interpretation of these ceremonies in Jacobsen, “Graven Image.”
38. On the *mīs pī* as a birth ritual, see Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 114–17. Assyriologists debate whether the ritual should be considered a birth ritual or merely a rite of passage; for a judicious review of the literature and defense of the attempt to view it a birth ritual, see Hurowitz, “Mesopotamian God Image,” 150–3.
39. The text is found in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 80 (=Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 80–1=Berlejung, *Theologie*, 431, 454) lines 51–2. They also appear in lines 181–6 of the Ninevite version of this ritual program, found in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 96–7 (=Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 176=Berlejung, *Theologie*, 431, 454).
40. Alternatively, one might maintain with Berlejung, “Washing,” 71–2, that the god was present in the statue from the beginning, because it is referred to as a god already in line a of the STT 200 incantation found in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 98: “On the day when the god was created (and) the pure statue was completed.” Therefore, Berlejung argues, the mouth-washing ritual merely perfects the statue: It “consolidated (but did not constitute) the connection between god and image” (71). Further, various texts assert that from the time a tree was planted from whose wood a statue would be made, the gods (especially Ea) designated its wood to be made into statues, thus indicating at least the material’s divine potential; see Hurowitz, “Make Yourself,” 343–4. On the other hand, the incantation cited by Berlejung may refer to “the day when the god was

- created” because on that day the statue became or received a god, not because the object was regarded as a god even before that day’s ritual began.
41. Lines 43–4 of the STT 200 Incantation, in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 99. The pointed contrast between this line and biblical texts such as Psalm 115.2–8 and 135.15–18 has been noted by several scholars. On the familiarity of biblical authors with the creation of cult statues in Mesopotamia, see Ephal, “Linguistic”; Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 26 and 45; and especially Hurowitz, “Make Yourself,” 346–7 (similar material is available in English in Hurowitz, “What Goes In”). It seems clear that Israelite and Judean authors were familiar with the ideology and vocabulary surrounding the *šalmu*, and they set out to deny that ideology specifically, using that ideology’s standard vocabulary.
 42. See the lines from the Babylonian and Ninevite ritual tablets cited in n.39 above and also the incantation in STT 200, lines 67–76 (in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 100). On the denial of human involvement in the fashioning of a *šalmu*, which is understood to be essentially the creation of the gods, see further Jacobsen, “Graven Image,” 29, and Hurowitz, “Make Yourself,” 341–2.
 43. STT 200, lines 11 and 19, in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 98; for the Akkadian of these lines, see p. 114 and n.134 there.
 44. See line 3 in the Babylonian edition of the ritual (BM 45749), in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 74, 77 (=Berlejung, *Theologie*, 424, 436). The text of this incantation is found in Sumerian and Akkadian in STT 198, in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 114–22 (= Berlejung, *Theologie*, 437).
 45. See line 54 of the Babylonian ritual program (BM 45749). The full text of this incantation appears in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 163–71, 184–5 (=Berlejung, *Theologie*, 456–8). The first eleven lines of the incantation describe the heavenly origin of the statue by a variety of divine hands; the twelfth line admits some human activity as well: “By the rites of purification the *apkallu*-priest of Ea has raised up your head.”
 46. See the last line of the first tablet of the incantation collection STT 198, in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 94 and 96 (line 64), and further the remarks in Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 9–10.
 47. Akkadian, *binût ilāni epšit amēlūti*. For the text in Akkadian and Sumerian, see Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 139 line 58a-b in text F (=K. 63a), also cited in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 99 n.100. My thanks go to Professor Dick for helping me locate this line.
 48. STT 200, lines 71–4, in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 100.
 49. STT 200:1–10, in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 98. (There are five lines in the English translation for every ten lines of cuneiform, because each line appears once in Akkadian and once in Sumerian.)
 50. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:841. The newborn Marduk is described in *Enuma Elish* with similar vocabulary; see 1:87, 96, 102. See further 4:57–8, 6:127–8. Other gods have similar auras in the epic; thus, in 1:67–8, Ea, having killed Apsu, takes Apsu’s aura and dons it himself.
 51. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:624.
 52. *Ibid.*, 2:511–12.
 53. On the matrix of terms and motifs (*melammu*, *pulhu*, *puluhtu*, *namrîrû*, etc.), see Cassin, *Splendeur*, 17–22. For a discussion of these terms as characteristics of the divine appearance and for many additional texts, see especially 27–51. See further Aster, “Phenomenon,” 29–176. On the most common of these terms, *melammu*, see especially

Aster's important discussion on 68–79, where Aster shows that this term came to be equated with radiance only in the eighth century B.C.E.

54. The Ninevite ritual text, translated in Walker and Dick, "Induction," 95 (with Akkadian on p. 94). For the Akkadian, see also Berlejung, *Theologie*, 430–1.
55. As noted by Hurowitz, "Make Yourself," 343–4; see the Erra Epic I:149 (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:765, and see his n.4 there, and Dalley, *Myths*, 291 and 314 n.21).
56. Cf. Berlejung, "Washing," 46; Jacobsen, "Graven Image," 28–9. A different perspective appears in Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 146, who argues that these rituals ascribed divine structures or functions to the statue without attributing ontological identity between the statue and the god. Aaron is right that the identity is not total, because the god was more than the statue he inhabited, but his attempt to deny the identity of statue and god – that is, to deny the real presence of the god in the statue – simply ignores the explicit and repeated evidence of the Mesopotamian texts themselves (which Aaron does not examine).
57. See Dalley, "Šalmu," 93; Porter, "Anxiety," 236; and see *CAD*, 16:80–1. Livingstone, "Image," 448–9, also notes that the word is often preceded by the divine determinative, but denies that the image was regarded as a god itself. The comparison on which he bases this judgment, however, is imprecise.
58. This is written with a Sumerian logogram as ALAM^{MEŠ}, which transliterates into Akkadian as the plural noun *šalmū*. See I:32, 35' in Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*, 2:T114.
59. Except on rare occasions when it refers to deified royal images that were worshipped in temples. On these primarily neo-Assyrian cases, see *CAD*, 16:80–81 a'-c'; Dalley, "Šalmu," 90; Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*, 2:T138, lines 19–20 and T147, line 12, and the especially useful and nuanced discussion in Machinist, "Kingship," 175–88.

Irene Winter argues that royal statues toward the end of the third millennium were in fact regarded as animated – that is, that they presented the king rather than represented him; see Winter, "Idols" (and cf. the similar thesis in Selz, "Holy Drum," 180–2). As Winter points out, it is precisely at this period that kings in southern Mesopotamia were deified (see 29–30, 33–5). Indeed, she argues that the ritual treatment of royal statues as animate results from the new and relatively short-lived view of the king that emerged at that time. Thus this single example as described by Winter fits the thesis presented here – to wit, that human embodiment was conceived of as radically different from divine embodiment – because in southern Mesopotamia toward the end of the third millennium royal embodiment belonged to the divine category, not the human category. At the same time, it seems to me significant that the evidence Winter gathers to argue that royal statues served as presentations rather than representations is not as strong as the evidence that divine statues contained the real presence of the god. Most of Winter's reasoning consists of first describing the theology of presentation in the first-millennium *pīt pī* texts (which were concerned exclusively with divine statues) and then suggesting that they provide an analogy for understanding late-third-millennium royal statuary. The legitimacy of this analogy rests on two pieces of evidence: first, the use of the Sumerian verb TUD (=birth, equivalent to the Akkadian verb *walādu*) in a twenty-first-century B.C.E. inscription on a statue of King Gudea of Lagash to describe the creation of the statue (Winter, 21); and second, a twentieth-century B.C.E. inscription on a royal image from Larsa that describes the image as "living" (23). No mouth-opening or mouth-washing rituals are attested to in reference to royal images. Thus even for kings in a period of divinized royalty, the evidence for animate images

is at best a matter of inference and hypothesis, as Winter acknowledges (23, 24); the presence of the king in his statues can only be described as implicitly alluded to (cf. 21), not explicitly stated as in the case of the divine statues.

On the relationship between divinity and royalty later in Mesopotamian history, see especially the balanced discussion in Machinist, “Kingship.” Machinist shows that, late in the Middle Assyrian period and increasingly in the neo-Assyrian, bold claims on behalf of royalty were made, and these began to resemble the earlier, Sumerian claims that the kings were gods. Yet even these claims did not fully equate kings with gods. Rather, they portrayed kings as the gods’ representatives or administrators; in spite of certain divine trappings, the neo-Assyrian kings were not quite on the same level as the gods themselves. The occasional reference to their *šalmu* as divine reflects this movement, without overturning the more general observation that Mesopotamian thinkers distinguished between divine images that presented a god and images of humans that represented them.

60. On these votive statues, see Renger, “Kultbild,” 6:308; Seidl, “Kultbild,” 6:314–15; Gruber, “Image,” 81–2.
61. This is even the case of statues of kings in the neo-Assyrian period, when one occasionally does find the word *šalmu*, referring to a statue of a king, preceded by the divine determinative. See Machinist, “Kingship,” 180.
62. Brinkman, “Shamash Cult,” 184.
63. In addition to Brinkman, “Shamash Cult,” see Hurowitz, “Make Yourself,” 340–1.
64. See *CAD*, 7:102–3, and Renger, “Kultbild,” 6:307. Similarly, a Sumerian inscription of *Sîn-iqīšam* (a king of Larsa in the early second millennium) says concerning an ALAM (image), “Having entered the temple, may it be a living (thing) in the temple.” See Frayne, *Old Babylonian*, 195, v, 3’–4’.
65. See the discussion in Hallo, “Cult Statue,” 11–14, and Renger, “Kultbild,” 313. On the cultic parading of these statues, see especially Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina Šulmi Īrub*.
66. Especially in the first millennium; most, though not all, of my data come from neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian texts. The development of the ideology of the divine statue from Sumerian through neo-Assyrian times lies well beyond the scope of this study; for an introduction to the topic, see especially Hallo, “Cult Statue,” 1–14, and the careful remarks of Walker and Dick, *Induction: Transliteration*, 18–19. For a brief discussion of some Sumerian texts that give evidence of the identity of deity and statue, see Hurowitz, “Mesopotamian God Image,” 155–6, and the remarks of Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 33. For additional evidence that a *pīt pī* ritual was performed on divine statues in Sumerian times, see Winter, “Idols,” 22. Note especially the following comment, from Selz, “Holy Drum,” 184, on the notion of divine presence in neo-Sumerian texts and rituals: “A statue of a god was an independent entity, because it stood on a holy place, and had the name of a god, the appearance of a god, and so on. It was these qualities of a statue, including its partaking in certain rituals, which left no doubt that it was the god himself. The same holds true for the ‘cultic objects’; it is their function and their special attributes, including their participation in holy rites, which made them god-like.” Selz further shows, however, that in early-second-millennium Sumer not only cult statues but also tools used in the cult were regarded as deified, though not necessarily to the same extent or in the same way as the cult statues. For the early second millennium, then, one can speak of a difference in degree between these kinds of objects but not a difference of conceptualization (see, e.g., his remarks on 167 and 181). The later texts with which we

are concerned in this chapter display a greater sense of difference between cult statues that are deified and those that are not.

67. See Renger, “Kultbild,” 309, 313; Berlejung, “Washing,” 46. The similarity to transubstantiation in the Catholic mass has been noted; see, e.g., Jacobsen, “Graven Image,” 23, and M. Dick’s comment in Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 57 n.2: “The divine Lord Jesus is confessed to be really present within the Eucharistic bread and is thought to be equally present on altars around the world, just as, for example, Shamash could be really present in Sippar or Babylon. The destruction of the statue of Shamash in Sippar did not destroy the god Shamash any more than the destruction of the Eucharistic host destroys Jesus.”
68. On this complexity (which appears to be more a difficulty for modern dualists than for the monists of the ancient Near East), see especially Jacobsen, “Graven Image,” 18–19, and cf. Renger, “Kultbild,” 313. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 152, argues that the existence of many statues shows that these statues could not have been regarded as identical with the deities; rather, he claims, they were an example of what calls “conceptual ascription,” in which one equates two things literally without insisting on their ontological identity (see 59–60). The model is a suggestive one insofar as it recognizes that the ancients could equate the deity and a statue without holding that the latter encompasses the entirety of the former. Though Aaron regards the statue merely as a particular type of sign of the deity, he fails to refute the thesis of other scholars that the statue truly embodies the god. Against Aaron’s proposal, we may ask, Why were a series of rituals necessary to produce conceptual ascription? Further, why were the ancients so careful to distinguish between two different types of statues (those that actually present the deity, and those that merely represent the deity) if they did not in fact believe that divine statues really were divine, not merely functionally related to the divine? Aaron lumps all emblems of deities into a single category that “evokes the *functions* of the deity” [152, his emphasis], and in doing so, he misses a crucial distinction asserted by the ancient texts themselves. The *mīs pī* ceremonies show that the ancients did regard the statues as being what we would call ontologically identical to the deity – whereas the fact that the god could be identical with many statues at a given time shows that we are not dealing with a typical Western form of ontology. (Catholic and Eastern Orthodox understandings of Mass or Eucharist are perhaps the one example of a Western ontology that resembles the ancient Near Eastern notion I describe here; I return to this parallel in [Chapter 6](#).)
69. See, e.g., the seventh-century Assyrian texts in Borger, *Inschriften Asarhaddons*, 14 (§11.8), 18 (§11.14), 23–4 (§11.32). These texts tell us that as a result of Marduk’s anger with Babylon the gods abandoned Esagila (Marduk’s temple in Babylon) and flew up to heaven; eleven years later, the gods give the emperor Esarhaddon permission to restore the statues. Three versions of the last of these texts refer to the statues as *šalam ilānī rabûti* (“the statues of the great gods”), whereas one parallel version of the same line refers to them simply as *ilāni u ištarī* (“the gods and goddesses”), a parallel that itself points to the identity of statue and god.
70. See Renger, “Kultbild,” 314, with references to relevant primary sources; Berlejung, “Washing,” 46 n.3; and Lambert, “Gott,” 3:544–5. For a helpful review of texts that describe gods abandoning their earthly homes, see Kutsko, *Between*, 56–8, 103–23. As Kutsko points out, this idea that a god can leave his statue and ascend to heaven seems to lie behind the Erra Epic; see 56, esp. n.107 and further references there.
71. See Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 63–7; Kutsko, *Between*, 121.

72. Quoted and translated in Hurowitz, “Mesopotamian God Image,” 152.
73. *Ibid.*, 150.
74. In K. 884, line 6, available in Parpola, *Letters*, 23. Renger, “Kultbild,” 309, and Livingstone, “Image,” 449, both note the importance of this line. Here it is necessary to recall that the *mīs pī/pīt pī* rituals were carried out not only on statues but also on other divine emblems such as reliefs (which could also be called *šalmus*). See Renger, 308, and Walker and Dick, “Induction,” 71.
75. See Dalley, “Šalmu,” 85–101. Livingstone, “Image,” 448–9, suggests that this god may not have been identical with the sun god but rather a hypostatized image of the sun. On the multiple possible identifications of this deified symbol, see also Aster, “Phenomenon,” 160–1.
76. See Abusch, “Ghost and God,” 374–6. To be sure, after several generations, the person may lose his or her individuality, entering the more generalized realm of deified ancestors (even as the flesh and even bones eventually decay). At that point, the human self seems to merge into the rather more undifferentiated realm of divine ancestors; see Abusch, 372. This process supports the conclusion I reach here: Having become part of the realm of divinity, the formerly human beings lose their distinct selves and merge into a (somewhat humble) divine miasma. On this issue, cf. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 77–9.
77. In so doing, I do not intend to enter the fray in the scholarly debate over whether Ugaritic ought to be classified as a Canaanite language. However one views this issue, it is clear (a) that Ugaritic and Canaanite cultures (or, if you prefer, Ugaritic and other Canaanite cultures) are closely related, and insights about both can be gained when we view them together, and (b) that Ugaritic texts and culture, which date to the Late Bronze Age, have important differences from (other) Canaanite cultures, which are largely evidenced by material from the Iron Age, so that one cannot assume that what one finds in Late Bronze Ugarit necessarily is true of Canaanites who lived later.
78. Concerning Baal, see especially the convenient overviews in Herrmann, “Baal”; Röllig, “Baal-Shamem”; H. Niehr, “Baal-Zaphon”; John Day, “Baal”; and Alan Cooper, “Divine Names.”
79. Identifying any god called Baal is complicated, because the word *baʿal* simply means “master” and thus, could be applied, at least in theory, to any number of gods. Thus, William Foxwell Albright and Frank Moore Cross argue that the *baʿal ḥamon* known from Punic and Phoenician inscriptions was not Hadad, but El. In this case, the term *baʿal ḥamon* merely indicates that the god El was the “master” or “owner” of Mount Ḥamon or Amanus. See Albright, *Yhwh and the Gods*, 233–5; Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 24–36; but see also the skeptical review of this thesis in Mark Smith, *Origins*, 138–9. Similarly, it is altogether likely that some ancient Israelites used the term *baʿal* to refer to Yhwh. Nevertheless, this term was used primarily as the title of or a synonym for Hadad already by the end of the third millennium, even though it could be applied to other deities as well. Israelites may have applied the epithet *baʿal* to Yhwh without viewing Yhwh as identical with Baal Hadad; alternatively, they may have equated Yhwh with Baal Hadad or some local Baal. In all likelihood both occurred, and sometimes the former may have led to the latter. On the tendency of some Israelites to equate Yhwh and Baal or to view Yhwh as a *baal*, see especially the conceptually clear presentation by Alan Cooper, “Divine Names,” 349–50. See further, among many others, Wolff, *Hosea*, 49–50; Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 191; Tigay, “Israelite Religion,” 163; John Day, “Baal,”

- 1:548; Mark Smith, *Early*, 50–5; and John Day, *Yhwh*, 71–3. P. Kyle McCarter suggests that a fragmentary poetic text found at Kuntillet Ajrud refers to Yhwh with the term *baʿal*; see McCarter, “Origins,” 23–9. See further Miller, *Religion*, 41, and Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 205, 244–5.
80. See Herrmann, “Baal,” 132; John Day, “Baal,” 1:547.
 81. The Akkadian text is found in Parpola and Watanabe, *Treaties*, 27, whose English translation I modify.
 82. Alan Cooper, “Phoenician Religion,” 11:313, refers to the three deities as apparently separate gods but goes on to state that the treaty viewed them as one. Other scholars simply claim that line iv.10 of the treaty regards these three Baals as distinct; see, e.g., Niehr, “Baal-Zaphon,” 153; Röllig, “Baal-Shamem,” 149; Mark Smith, *Early*, 43. Similarly, the translations in Parpola and Watanabe, *Treaties*, and Pritchard, *ANET*, add the word “and” between Baal Malagê and Baal Saphon, thus implying that the text speaks of three gods. However, no explicit copula appears between Baal Malagê and Baal Saphon, and (more important) the verb *lušatba* (a Š-stem injunctive of *tebû/tabāʿu*) in iv.10 is clearly in the singular (the plural would be *lušatbû*).
 83. On the identity of local manifestations of high gods and the high gods themselves more generally, see especially McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 125–6. Baal Şaphon was not always regarded as identical with Baal Shamêm, however; see Alan Cooper, “Divine Names,” 350.
 84. For a brief review of the texts, see Niehr, “Baal-Zaphon,” 152. For a fuller discussion of these lists, their place in sacrificial ritual, and their various recensions in Ugaritic and in Mesopotamian cuneiform from Ugarit, see Pardee, *Ritual*, 11–24, which further provides the texts and translations.
 85. KTU 1:47:1–16. For an edition, see Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín, *CAT*, 83–4. The same list with minor variations appears in KTU 1.118 and 1.148 and in a Mesopotamian cuneiform version in RS 2.024. All these texts are presented synoptically and with a useful introduction, English translation, and notes in Pardee, *Ritual*, 12–16, 23–4.
 86. Or, “The gods of Şaphon,” following the suggestion Pardee, *Ritual*, 15, and of Mark Smith, *Origins*, 31 and 42, both of whom see this first line as a title or introduction that gives the class to which all the deities subsequently mentioned belong.
 87. Or perhaps, “divine ancestors,” or “god of the father.” For a brief discussion of this complex term, see Healy, “Ilib.” A parallel Akkadian text from Ugarit suggests that it refers to a single god, perhaps identical with Bethel, according to Astour, “Some New,” 279.
 88. The identity of these baal-gods is unclear. See the review of literature in Mark Smith, *Origins*, 232–3 n.1. Smith, following Pardee, argues that they are probably not the baals of specific places. After all, they point out, if they were baals of specific places, the various place names could have been given, as was the case for Baal of Şaphon. On the other hand, the repetition of the plural term six times suggests that a large number of local manifestations may be referred to here, too numerous or too minor to be enumerated on their own. Further, one can understand that the text might specify Baal of Şaphon rather than Baal of Ugarit, Baal of Tyre, Baal of Şidon, etc., because Şaphon, unlike Ugarit, Tyre, Şidon, and the like is at least in part a mythological location like Olympus. In any event, whoever these baal-gods are, what is significant for my argument is that they are listed on their own but immediately after Baal of Şaphon – not as a deity identical with Baal of Şaphon but not quite independent of him either.

89. Or *kosharot*, or “goddesses of reproduction.” See Pardee, “Kosharot.”
90. Or “Moon.”
91. KTU 1.65. The readings are not fully clear, however; see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 43 and 219 notes 19–20 with further references, as well as Pardee, *Ritual*, 21–3, who reads Baal of Ugarit and Baal of Şaphon but not Hadad. Avishur does not find the names of these gods here, understanding the word *add* as a verb meaning “to aid” and reading *b^cd* (on behalf of”) rather than *b^cl*; see Avishur, *Studies*, 314–15 (against which, however, see Pardee 24 n.18).
92. Though not according to the translation provided by Pardee and by Smith in note 86.
93. H. Niehr, “Baal-Zaphon,” 152.
94. KTU 1.148 (Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín, *CAT*, 145; text with translation and notes in Pardee, *Ritual*, 44–9). Pardee notes that the order of gods in this text is identical to that of the list discussed at the beginning of this paragraph; see the synoptic list he provides on 13–14.
95. See lines 26–8 of the text and Pardee, *Ritual*, 101 n.37.
96. E.g., KTU 1.41.33–5, 1.65.10–11, 1.87.36–8, 1.109.9–11, 1.112.22–3, 1.130.22–5. For texts of this type with translations and discussion, see Pardee, *Ritual*, 25–72.
97. See note 79. Not all scholars accept this equation, however; see the comprehensive review of the literature in Mark Smith, *Origins*, 138–9.
98. In an inscription from Carthage, in Donner and Röllig, *KAI*, Nr. 79 (1:17, 2:96–7). My vocalization, of course, is entirely speculative.
99. Possible exceptions are Baal Ḥamon and Yhwh, who retain identities distinct from Hadad and are mentioned on their own; see note 79. But the fact remains that other baal-gods are distinct from each other only on a surface level and develop no identity separate from Hadad.
100. For a very helpful review of the opinions, see Alan Cooper, “Divine Names,” 352–61.
101. McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 67. Cf. Huffmon, “Name.” For Canaanite examples of שם meaning not only “name” but also “one bearing the name,” see Hoftijzer et al., *Dictionary*, 2:1167, def. 2. This unity of name and object named can also be seen in the frequent parallelism of “God” and “God’s name” in Hebrew poetry: הַקְלוּ יְהוָה הַקְלוּ עַבְדֵי הוּא הַקְלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם הוּא (“Praise Yah! Praise, O servants of Yhwh – praise the name of Yhwh,” Psalm 113.1); בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־הוּא וְכֹל־קִרְבֵי אֶת־שֵׁם קִדְשׁוֹ (“O my soul, bless the name of Yhwh; all my body, bless His sacred name,” Psalm 103.1).
- A detailed critique of the concept of nominal realism appears in Richter, *Deuteronomistic*, 14–22. The critique bases itself on a variety of theoretical points related to the study of the history of religions and developmental psychology, but it does not address the bountiful evidence for the existence of nominal realism in ancient Near Eastern texts themselves (and in particular the texts in which “name” and “thing named” are clearly identical to each other). However learned and enlightening on the broadest level, Richter’s critique does not overturn McBride’s thesis. Further, Richter rather overstates the claims made by scholars like McBride, thus creating something of a straw man that is rejected more easily than McBride’s subtle reasoning.
102. This is again clear from Hebrew texts. Thus פָּנֶיךָ (“your face”) in 2 Samuel 17.17 means “you, yourself; you personally”: Hushai says to Absalom, וּפָנֶיךָ הֲלָכִים בְּקִרְבִּי – “You yourself will go into the battle.” On this term, see further Aḥituv, “Countenance,” 6.
103. See the discussion in Seow, “Face,” 232; Aḥituv, “Countenance,” 7–9; McCarter, “Aspects,” 148–9. For an attempt to identify Tannit with Asherah, see Cross, *Canaanite*

- Myth*, 30–55, and Oden, *Studies in Lucian's*, 92–3, 141–9, but see the critique of this view in John Day, “Asherah” (JBL Article), 396–7.
104. Specifically, in KAI 78.2, 79.1, 85.1, 86.1, 87.2, 88.1, 94.1, 97.1, 102.2, 105.1, 137.1, and 164.1.
 105. See KAI 72B3, 78.2.
 106. KAI 79.1–2, 10–11.
 107. Aḥituv, “Countenance,” 7. Cf. McCarter, “Aspects,” 148.
 108. KAI 14.18.
 109. This is a passage from the end of the Kirta Epic, KTU 1.16.vi.54–7 (Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín, CAT, 46). For the text with an English translation, see Greenstein, “Kirta,” 42.
 110. KTU 1.2.i.8 (Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín, CAT, 6=Mark Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” 98). On these references to Astarte as the Name of Baal, see further Seow, “Face,” 322, and Avishur, *Phoenician Inscriptions*, 148.
 111. For convenient overviews, see Wyatt, “Astarte,” and John Day, “Ashtoreth.” Astarte’s role as Baal’s “Name” is odd, Mark Smith points out, because the two deities “neither act together nor appear as consorts in the mythological texts.” See Mark Smith, *Origins*, 74. Based on much later evidence from the Hellenistic-Phoenician writer Philo of Byblos, Saul Olyan argues that Astarte was in fact Baal’s consort; see Olyan, *Asherah*, 48. Olyan’s conclusion is somewhat imprecise. In Philo of Byblos, 1.10.22 (=Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 50–1), Astarte is identified as the wife of Kronos (i.e., El), not of Zeus (i.e., Baal). The passage goes on to state, however, that Astarte and Zeus/Baal rule together with the consent of Kronos/El, wording that does not imply their marriage but posits some connection between them.
 112. Astarte may be a consort of Baal or perhaps his daughter in these texts. See McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 135 and 175 n.253, and cf. Hoftijzer et al., *Dictionary*, 1157, def. 4. What matters for my purpose is that Baal and the goddess are closely related.
 113. KTU 1.65, lines 6–8. Translation from Mark Smith, *Origins*, 43. This understanding, it must be admitted, works best if one classifies the text as a god list, as do Smith and also Pardee, *Ritual*, 21–4. Others, however, propose that it is a prayer or psalm, in which case the words in question might be seen as predicate adjectives in a series of nominal clauses (“Gracious is El, constant is El, peaceful is El . . .”). For this interpretation, see Avishur, *Studies*, 310–13; for a review of the literature concerning the form of the psalm, see 308–9. On the other hand, even Avishur acknowledges that the words are most likely nouns that, he argues, function adjectivally. Especially because *šlm* does not typically function as an adjective, Smith’s translation and that of Pardee (*Ritual*, 22–3), which construe these words quite normally as nouns in the construct, are more likely.
 114. Mark Smith, *Origins*, 76, citing KTU 1.123. See further Philo of Byblos 1.10.13–14 (=Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 44–7 and 83 n.74) for references to additional Phoenician and Ugaritic texts mentioning the pair. On the connection to Philo of Byblos, see already Astour, “Some New,” 282–3. For the text itself, which seems to be a prayer that includes a list of gods who are invoked, see Pardee, *Ritual*, 150–3.
 115. Astour, “Some New,” 282, suggests that *ngh wsr* is the same deity known from the mythological reference in Isaiah 14.12–15. If this is the case (and the reasoning is quite speculative), then we have another example of an independent god in this list, though his association with El remains strong; see the reference to עֲלִיִן in Isaiah 14.14b and to

- כוכבי אֵל in 13a, albeit in a negative manner: This deity wanted to take El's place or at least to be his equal (אֵלִים לְעֵלִיּוֹן, 14.14b).
116. For an overview of all three kinds of evidence (numismatic, textual, and artifactual), see especially Mettinger, *No Graven*, 81–113, and cf. 57–69 and 115–34. See also Broshi, “*Maṣṣēbâ*.”
 117. On these terms as referring to a standing stone (rather than a temple), see especially Fitzmyer, *Aranaic Inscriptons*, 131–2; Donner and Röllig, *KAI*, 2:262; Hoftijzer et al., *Dictionary*, 1:159 (with further bibliography).
 118. In most of the Phoenician and Punic cases, these are more specifically grave markers. In light of the role of ancestor worship among Phoenicians, it remains legitimate to call these stelae objects (or at the very least locations) of veneration.
 119. Van der Toorn, “Worshipping.” Van der Toorn also notes that *abnu* (“stone”) may refer at times to a deified stone pillar, which would constitute yet another term denoting divine presence in an object. See the similar conclusion of Zevit, *Religions*, 257, who points out that these stelae were not regarded as symbols but were seen to be “engorged by the power of the presence, and hence for all practical purposes en-theosed in some way.” This thesis is already presented in W. Robertson Smith, *Religion*, 203–8.
 120. Philo of Byblos, in Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 1.10.23. For the Greek text with English translation and notes, see Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 52–3.
 121. See van der Toorn, “Worshipping,” 3–7; Rofé, *Belief*, 219–24; Röllig, “Bethel”; Mettinger, *No Graven*, 35, 131–2.
 122. On the Phoenician affiliation of this god in Assyrian sources, see Mark Smith, *Early*, 25, and Mark Smith, *Origins*, 137–8. On the other hand, van der Toorn, “Worshipping,” 3–4, argues against Smith that Bethel is an Aramean god. In either case, Bethel is Northwest Semitic, not Mesopotamian, and hence part of the cultural sphere of the betyls and stelae.
 123. In Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 1.10.16, in Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 48.
 124. Contra Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 87 n.86, who assert rather implausibly that the Βάιτυλος fathered by Ouranos in 1.10.16 is unrelated to the βαίτυλῖα fashioned by Ouranos seven paragraphs later.
 125. Thus Mettinger suggests, “The god Bethel perhaps owes his ‘existence’ to a process of divinization of the betyl” (Mettinger, *No Graven*, 131). So too Rofé, *Belief*, 231.
 126. The statement of Mark Smith, *Origins*, 247 n.39, that the betyls and stelae “do not represent the deity per se, but mark the *place* of the deity’s cultic presence” strikes me as introducing a distinction without a difference. The betyl housed the deity, which is to say that the deity was present in that particular object in a way that the deity was not present in other objects nearby. Once we recall that the deity could be present in more than one object (or, as I phrase it, the deity could have more than one body), the distinction between the place of a deity’s presence and the deity itself disappears. To be sure, there were differences between the Mesopotamian *šalmu* and the Northwest Semitic betyls and stelae: The former were given the features of a body (ears, mouth, eyes, nose), whereas the latter were usually abstract and aniconic. (On the tradition of aniconism among Northwest Semites, see Mettinger, *No Graven*, *passim*.) Mesopotamians induced divine presence into objects that were thought to resemble the heavenly body of the deity, whereas Northwest Semites often induced divine presence into objects that made no attempt to do so, a situation that may point to different understandings of the divine: Among Northwest Semites, the otherness of the divine

may have discouraged attempts at rendering a god in a realistic fashion. In both cases, nevertheless, a relatively small object was believed to become animated by the living presence of a deity, and thus the use of the term “a god’s body” or at least “a discrete part of the god’s body” is justified.

The significance of this distinction is overlooked in Lorberbaum, *Image*, 92–3, who regards the physical similarity between icon and deity to be the deciding factor in making the deity manifest in the object. As a result, he ignores the aniconic examples of divine immanence prevalent among Northwest Semites while conflating two very different sorts of *šalmu* in Mesopotamia (those that presented a deity and those that represented a deity or a human; see my earlier remarks). Lorberbaum’s claim that the crucial reason for the presence of the deity is the similarity between icon and god imports Platonic notions of ideal and participating object into ancient Near Eastern settings where they are not heuristically helpful. Against this claim, we should note that Mesopotamian texts make clear that deities could and did leave their statues, and the deities would not return until another *mīs pî* or *pīt pî* was conducted. Nevertheless, the physical appearance of the statue remained the same even after the god left it. Similarly, even though Lorberbaum claims that Greek statues manifested or contained the real presence of a god (see especially his comments on 294–5), he fails to note that the strongest evidence on behalf of this claim comes precisely from those that were not realistic depictions of the gods but crude representations or purely abstract stones or planks. On the Greek evidence, see further my discussion of Margalit Finkelberg’s work on pp. 32–4.

127. The texts, including VAT 9656 (which appears in Kataja and Whiting, *Grants*, 104), are discussed in Hurowitz, “Mesopotamian God Image,” 153–4.
128. Hurowitz, “Mesopotamian God Image,” 154, and see his references to the articles of Cassuto and Loewenstamm in n.23 there.
129. See van der Toorn, “Worshipping,” 7–10; Mettinger, *No Graven*, 116, 123–5, 130. On the connection of the *skn/sikkānum* with betyls, see further Durand, “Culte,” and Dietrich, Loretz, and Mayer, “Sikkanum ‘Betye.’” On the Northwest Semitic context of the term in Akkadian texts, see Fleming, *Installation*, 76 n.2.
130. See Dietrich, Loretz, and Mayer, “Sikkanum ‘Betye,’” 134, and references in n.7 there; Durand, “Nom,” 6; and Mettinger, *No Graven*, 130.
131. On the association of *sikkānū* with particular gods, see further Dietrich, Loretz, and Mayer, “Sikkanum ‘Betye,’” 133–4, and Durand, “Culte,” 83.
132. KAI 77.2. See further van der Toorn, “Worshipping,” 8.
133. KAI 58. On the identity of 𐎧𐎢𐎠 and Sakkan/Sikkun, see the comments of Donner and Röllig, *KAI*, 2:72.
134. See van der Toorn, “Worshipping,” 10; cf. Mettinger, *No Graven*, 130.
135. On the association of betyls with El and Baal (as Adonis and as Melkart), see Mettinger, *No Graven*, 90–1, 108–9; on the association with El, see also Astour, “Some New,” 279, esp. n.25. One may further recall that biblical texts at times associate the מַצְבֵּה with Yhwh/El; see, e.g., Genesis 28.10–19 and Exodus 24.4 On the association of betyls with the dead, see Hoftijzer et al., *Dictionary*, 2:676, def. 1; and the list of filial duties in the Aqhat epic (KTU 1.17.i.26–27 [Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín, *CAT*, 48] and parallels).
136. See Mettinger, *No Graven*, 98, and cf. the many examples of multiple stelae found in Israelite and Canaanite sites, 168–91. See also W. Robertson Smith, *Religion*, 210–12.

- For example, in Exodus 24.4 and Joshua 4.20, all twelve stelae were sacred to the single God.
137. A discussion of Egyptian texts is beyond my competence, but it may be noted in passing that Egyptian religion displays the tendencies I have described (divine selves that are fluid, fragmenting, and overlapping) to a very pronounced degree. See Hornung, *Conceptions*, 66–142; Baines, “Egyptian Deities.”
 138. On this ritual, which is always connected with funeral rituals in the texts currently known, see Bonnet, “Mundöffnung,” and Lorton, “Theology,” 147–79 (on the connection to the funerary realm, see Lorton 148, but note Lorton’s argument that the ritual was in all likelihood performed on cult statues as well, 149–51). A significant difference between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian rituals should be noted: The Egyptian ceremonies were used on a wider variety of objects than the Mesopotamian (see Bonnet, 487b). In particular, the Egyptians performed these rituals not only on cult statues and temples (thus evincing a notion of multiple embodiment in the realm of the gods) but also on dead humans (thus pointing toward a parallel between the realm of divinity and humanity that differs in an essential way from what we see in Mesopotamia and Canaan). On the varied uses of the ritual in Egypt, see the material collected by Bjerke, “Remarks,” and especially the methodologically careful analysis in Finnestad, “Meaning.”
 139. My colleague Richard Kieckhefer, for example, points out to me that Iamblichus discusses the entry of a god’s presence into a cult statue. See further the references in n.159 later.
 140. For a discussion of passages such of these from both Homeric epics with many examples involving various deities, see Rose, “Divine Disguisings,” and, more briefly, Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 187.
 141. Translation from West, *Homeric Hymns*, 55. For Demeter’s transformation, see also lines 188–9.
 142. See Rose, “Divine Disguisings,” 70–1.
 143. Alas.
 144. Here I find myself disagreeing with a remark made by Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 46, even though (as we see later) my main point about archaic and classical Greek perceptions of divinity accords with his. He asserts that a god’s body escapes the limitation that prevents a human body from being in more than one location in space. His examples, however, show not that divine bodies can be in more than one space but that space does not limit a deity’s ability to know and act, in large part because a god can move from one location to another at will. Here again, I think, divine and human bodies differ in quantity but not quality: The divine body moves much more rapidly than a human body ever could, but it is not in two places at once.
 145. In some circumstances in Greek literature, even a human body can change in the same manner as a divine one. Thus, Athena causes Odysseus’ body to be transformed, god-like, from that of an old man to that of a hero in his prime, with the result that Telemachus mistakes him for a divinity (*Odyssey*, 16:174; see also 6:229–43). On the parallel between what happens to his human body and Olympian bodies, see Rose, “Divine Disguisings,” 64–5; Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 40–1; and Steiner, *Images*, 97–8. The fact that some human bodies change in a manner almost identical to that of divine bodies underscores the fundamental similarity I am positing between divine

and human bodies in Greek religion. This does not mean, of course, that the mode of transformation is completely identical. One difference between human and divine bodies is that the latter can at times become visible to one person but not another; see *Iliad* 1:199 for an example.

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 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. My thanks to Matthew Rogers of Northwestern University for encouraging me to think through this issue.

146. Eliade's category of hierophany is crucial to my argument here, because this category is distinct from but partially overlapping with incarnation. J. Z. Smith critiques Eliade's notion of hierophany in J. Z. Smith, "Acknowledgements." But Smith conflates the categories of hierophany and incarnation (see 334), whereas Eliade's language and his many examples make clear that embodiment of the divine is only one type of hierophany. See especially in Eliade, *Patterns*, 13, and, for two examples chosen at random, see his careful description of fertilizing stones on p. 120 of *Patterns* and his explanation of the popular and elite interpretations of the betyl on pp. 229–31. Eliade's category of hierophany has great explanatory power precisely because it is not identical to incarnation, just as it is not synonymous with symbol. Rather, the term "hierophany" comprehends a range of phenomena that overlap with both those categories. On p. 334 of his article, Smith offers another critique of the category of hierophany; Eliade anticipates and rebuts Smith's critique on pp. 12–13 of *Patterns*.
147. Finkelberg, "Two Kinds." This distinction, she notes, is partially adumbrated in Robertson, "Greek Art," 164–6, 169 and in Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 91. A similar distinction underlies the discussion in Steiner, *Images*, 80–95, and 102–3, though note her reservations on 104.
148. Finkelberg, "Two Kinds," 30. Cf. Robertson, "Greek Art," 169.
149. Not all scholars would fully agree with the strong boundary Finkelberg draws between these two categories. For a very thorough and nuanced discussion of the distinctions – and overlaps – among cult statue, votive statue, and representational statue, see Scheer, *Gottheit*, 4–8, who questions attempts to maintain these categories, especially because no consistent distinction exists at the level of terminology (p. 33). For Scheer, even statues that belong to what Finkelberg would describe as the more decorative category can sometimes be termed cultic statues (see 143–4). So far as my own argument goes, we shall see, whether the distinction fully holds is not important; what will matter is the precise religious status of cult statues – whether the distinction between cult statues and other types of religious statues is fixed and precise (as it is for Finkelberg) or fluid and shifting (as Scheer suggests it should be). Because Finkelberg's thesis regarding divine presence is strongest in relation to the older statues, my discussion will focus on them.

150. Finkelberg, “Two Kinds,” 32–3. On the nonrepresentational statues, see also the brief references in Coldstream, “Greek Temples,” 71, 90; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 89; Steiner, *Images*, 80–8.
151. Pausanias, 1.26.6, quoted by Finkelberg, “Two Kinds,” 33 and 34.
152. Some were said to have fallen from heaven (see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 91; Finkelberg, “Two Kinds,” 34–5). This trope recalls the *pīt pī*’s insistence that the *ṣalmu* was born in heaven. This one trope on its own clearly shows the numinous nature of the statue, but not its embodiment of the god. On the miraculous nature of these statues, see especially Scheer, *Gottheit*, 83–9. Scheer argues quite plausibly that the miracles associated with the statues point toward their intimate connection with the gods but not necessarily toward their identity with the gods.
153. Eliade, *Cosmos*, 4.
154. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 5–6.
155. It is perhaps because the Greek god was not located in these statues that sacrifice in ancient Greece was typically conducted in the open air – not inside the temple, where the statue rested in the *naos* or main room of the temple. “During the sacred work of sacrifice at the altar the temple is at the back of the participants; they look towards the east and pray to the sky So the pious man stands as it were beneath the eyes of the deity; but it is not the inner space of the temple which draws him in” (Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 92.) The contrast with Mesopotamian temples in this regard is pronounced; there, the act of sacrifice was focused on the *ṣalmu*. See, e.g., Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 92–3; Bottéro, *Religion*, 126 and 130.
156. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 153–5, provides a similar discussion of the ancient cult statues, seeing them neither as an artistic representation or symbol nor as a true embodiment but something in between. They make the god’s power present to the worshipper by “constructing a bridge, as it were, that will reach toward the divine,” even as they “emphasize what is inaccessible and mysterious in divinity” (155). A cult statue, then, constitutes an *axis mundi*, which is not the same as an embodiment.
157. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 91.
158. Scheer, *Gottheit*, 113, 115.
159. *Ibid.*, 111–14. I might add further that the connection between some of the late antique evidence and neo-Platonism (see her references in 111–12 n.594) suggests the possibility of influence from the ancient Near East (especially Egypt). On the importance of looking at this issue within well-defined chronological limits, see also the careful methodological discussion and critical review of the literature in Scheer’s remarks on 44–6.
160. On the tendency of some of the most venerated statues to be kept out of sight, see also Steiner, *Images*, 87–8.
161. Finkelberg, “Two Kinds,” 38.
162. See Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Sefer ’Ahavah, Hilkhoh Tefillah Unesi’at Kappayim* 14.7; Joseph Karo, *Shulḥan ’Arukh ’Orah Ḥayyim* 128.23.
163. This is evident from the statement of Rabbi Yosi in *y. Megillah*, [chapter 4](#), end of halacha 8 (=6c). See further the comment of *Tōsāfōt* to *b. Hagigah* 15a (ד”ה הכהנים) and also Meiri’s comment to *b. Megillah* 24b.
164. See Rashi to *b. Hagigah* 15a, ד”ה ומברכין .
165. On the extraordinary parallel between the uses of Torah texts in Israel and of divine images elsewhere in the ancient Near East, see van der Toorn, “Iconic Book,” as well as

- my comments in the conclusion to the commentary on Psalm 24 in Sommer, *Psalms 1–30*.
166. See Joseph Karo, *Shulḥan ‘Arukh ’Orah Ḥayyim* 147.1. On the extraordinary respect demanded for a Torah scroll, see also Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Sefer ’Ahavah, Hilkhhot Sefer Torah* 10.2–11.
167. Steiner, *Images*, 105.
168. *Ibid.*, 106–20; quotation from 111.
169. *Ibid.*, 115. She does adduce some stronger parallels from Hellenistic and Roman era evidence, but, as I noted earlier, these parallels may be due to Egyptian and Babylonian influence after those areas became part of the Hellenistic world. Steiner also points to mythological and poetic texts in which gods fill up certain items in order to vivify them (116–20). These narratives in which deities create new living things (which do not become idols in any event) hardly constitute a parallel to the action of human priests in the *mīs pî* and *pîr pî* ceremonies.
170. See my earlier discussion, pp. 19–20. Similarly explicit statements are made regarding the statues in the Egyptian mouth-opening ceremonies; see Bonnet, “Mundöffnung,” 487a–b.
171. This may also become clear from narrative and poetic texts in which a deity briefly visits his or her temple. Such visits suggest that the deity’s physical presence is not normally there. See, e.g., the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 5.59–60.
- Some scholars have argued for the physical presence of Athena in her temple at Troy on the basis of *Iliad* 6.311 (for a review of the literature, see Scheer, *Gottheit*, 47–9 and notes). A closer look at the text compels us to reject this suggestion. Homer tells us that, after hearing the prayers of Trojan women in her temple, Athena “refused, denied” or “turned her head” (ἀνένευε). There is some question whether the verb (from the root ἀνανεύω) should be taken to refer to a physical gesture at all; it may rather indicate that the goddess spurned their prayer (see the brief remark of Kirk, *The Iliad*, 200). Even in the event that this verb should be taken to refer to literal movement of a head, there is no indication in the text that it was her statue, suddenly animated, that moved. On the contrary, the women seem not to have noticed that she turned her head, and this circumstance suggests that the statue did not move. The women were in front of her statue, and Athena, who was herself elsewhere at this time (or was visiting the temple but was invisible to the women), turned her head. (Scheer’s claim [48] that the statue turned its head but the women in front of it somehow failed to notice has no basis in the text.)
172. As Steiner herself points out, Steiner, *Images*, 115 n.145. On the somewhat loose connection of altars to statues, see Scheer, *Gottheit*, 139–41.
173. All this is not to deny that some people even in classical Greece may have regarded these statues as if they housed a divinity. Steiner, *Images*, 79, suggests that Heraclitus’ ridicule of such a view may presuppose that someone in ancient Greece in fact entertained this notion. (See, however, the critical comments in Scheer, *Gottheit*, 46–7, regarding the reliability of polemics in philosophical texts as evidence for actual religious beliefs and practices.) Nevertheless, the basic contrast between archaic and classical Greek culture on the one hand and ancient Near Eastern culture on the other remains noteworthy, even when we realize that over the centuries many local exceptions to it must have emerged. It is suggestive that the closest thing to evidence for fluidity in the Greek pantheon tends to center around the figure of Dionysus (see the references in Steiner, 84–5) – whom the classical Greeks regarded as a recent and exotic addition to the

pantheon who came from farther east. (In fact, his cult had existed in Greece already in archaic times, but the ancients may have been correct to see him as an eastern import; see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 162–3.) In any event, Dionysus may be an exception that proves the rule; as Burkert, 162, notes, the “blurring of the contours of a well-formed personality makes the Dionysos cult stand in contrast to what is justly regarded as typically Greek.”

Whether at some earlier stage worshippers in Minoan-Mycenaean times may have understood cult statues as more literally divine is a separate question that has no bearing on my thesis here (to wit, that not all polytheistic systems evince the notion of divine fluidity). It is striking that some of the objects in Finkelberg’s category of cultic statue are plain wooden poles or stones (see Finkelberg, “Two Kinds,” 36). These seem quite similar to objects utilized in Northwest Semitic cults, such as the betyl, the *maṣṣebah*, and the *’asherah*. In light of the anointing of stelae in Genesis 28.18–19 and 35.14 and also perhaps the anointing of the stele (*sikkānu*) of Ḫebat in an Emar ritual I discuss on pp. 49–50, it is especially interesting that Pausanias informs us that the people of Delphi poured oil on one of the stones that served as a Greek cult statue (Finkelberg, 36; for a similar example, see Steiner, 111–12). The train of connections is too prolonged to allow the thesis that this custom functioned in Greece as it did in Northwest Semitic cultures, much less that these cult statues were, in origin, also regarded as incarnations. The possibility is nonetheless intriguing. In all events, whatever the origin of these statues, I am unaware of evidence from archaic or classical Greece that indicates they were regarded as incarnations of the god whom they represented. On the origin of these wooden and stone markers and their possible connection to the ancient Near East, see further Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 85–6 and 381 n.15.

174. Scheer, *Gottheit*, esp. 96, 115, 118, 134, 143.
175. Cf. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 155.
176. On the *axis mundi*, see especially Eliade, *Cosmos*, 12–13.
177. For examples, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 120, 126, 184.
178. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 47.
179. Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*.
180. On Mesopotamian gods as forces rendered in human terms to make them approachable, see Jacobsen, *Toward the Image*, esp. 10, and more generally 2–14, 16–18, 73–6; see also Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 3–21. See also the brief but very clear statements of Geller, “God of the Covenant,” 309, and of Muffs, *Personhood*, 21.
181. On the “overflowing” nature of divinity that is glimpsed only partially in time and space, see, e.g., Wach, *Comparative*, 41.
182. Connected to this phenomenon is the tendency of Mesopotamian religion to hypostatize qualities or epithets of a particular deity so that they became semi-independent deities. Thus, *mēšaru* (justice) and *kittu* (righteousness) are associated with the sun god, Shamash, but they are sometimes described as gods themselves in the court of Shamash, and offerings were made to them as distinct beings. See Ringgren, *Word*, 52–8. They were an aspect of Shamash’s self, but also deities with enough of a distinct identity that they could be worshipped alongside other gods, though usually they remain closely related to Shamash. Ringgren notes the debate over the extent to which deified epithets really were conceived of as real gods (72–3), but in light of the fluidity discussed earlier, this debate is unnecessary: They may have been related to the god from whom they emanated just as the various Ishtars

were related to each other or Marduk and Anu were related. They are merely different masks given to the manifestations of various cosmic forces (e.g., forces of fertility, or potent authority, or healing) that were intricately and intimately related to each other. Just as these forces were separated only at the level of phenomenon or perception, so too the hypostases and epithets were separate but at root part of the god.

2: THE FLUIDITY MODEL IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

1. Much of the discussion in this chapter is concerned specifically with J and E texts. For a defense of the term “monotheism” in relation to them, see especially my discussions of work by Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” in nn.110 and 126 in the Appendix.
2. The literature on the finds from Kuntillet Ajrud and the related finds at Khirbet el-Qom is enormous. For the texts, see the helpful edition and commentary in Aḥituv, *Handbook*, 111–15, 152–61. Of the many studies, note especially the treatments in Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 210–48; Zevit, *Religions*, 370–437; and Miller, *Religion*, 31–6, with recent bibliography.
3. McCarter, “Aspects,” 140–1. For this interpretation of 2 Samuel 15.7, see already Bade, “Monoyhwhismus,” 85, and Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:188.
4. On local Yhwhs in ancient Israel, see also Bade, “Monoyhwhismus”; Höffken, “Bemerkung.” On the possibility that “Yhwh God everlasting” (Genesis 21.33), “Yhwh My Banner” (Exodus 17.15), and “Yhwh of Peace” (Judges 6.24) were specific manifestations similar to a local Yhwh, see Bade, 85, and Rofé, “Summary,” 9.
5. See Donner, “Hier sind,” 49–50.
6. See Kinsley, “Avatāra.”
7. The whole of the chapter stems from J; some critics speculate that parts of 18.17–33 are from a secondary hand, but this (rather baseless) speculation does not affect my argument. See, e.g., Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:26–7, and Skinner, *Genesis*, 298–9.
8. Most commentators avoid acknowledging this, but as Greenstein, “God of Israel,” 57, points out,

Although most exegetes both classical and modern shy away from acknowledging that the Lord himself is one of Abraham’s three visitors, only such a reading accounts for the repeated sudden addresses of God to Abraham (e.g., vv. 13, 17, 20) and the fact that without assuming that the Lord is a member of the trio, the third visitor disappears without a trace (while the two travel to Sodom, cf. 18:16 and 19:1). Assume that God is one of the three, and there are no gaping holes in the plot and the verses make sense in their present sequence.

That Yhwh manifests Himself in all three men may be implied by the plural verb נצבים, because, as Savran points out, this verb is characteristic of passages that narrate God’s appearance to humans; see Savran, *Encountering*, 47, and see further 63 n.72.

9. The MT points the *nun* in word אֲדֹנָי in verse 3 with a *qamatz* rather than a *hiriq*, apparently indicating that Abraham uses the term to refer to God. In rabbinic literature, however, we find a debate as to whether the word here really refers to God; see the debate between the *stam* on the one hand and Ḥanina and Rabbi El’azar on the other in Babylonian Talmud *Shebu’ot* 35b and parallels. Various modern commentators have argued that the MT pointing is an error; see Skinner, *Genesis*, 299–300; Gunkel,

Genesis, 193; and see especially the clear discussion in Breuer, “Messengers,” 381–2. The consonantal text intends a *hiriq* (“My lord,” “Sir”) or perhaps a *pataḥ* (“My Lords,” “Sirs,” “Gentlemen”). As Skinner points out, “The interest of the story turns largely on his ignorance of his guests.” Abraham is tested here in regard to his hospitality to strangers. If he had known that his visitors were in fact divine, the test would have been meaningless. On Abraham’s initial failure to realize with Whom he spoke, see also Kugel, *God of Old*, 11–13, and Breuer, 382.

10. For an excellent discussion of the alternation between the singular and the plural in these verses, see Breuer, “Messengers,” 380–5. Breuer’s solution (on 386–95) differs from mine, but his description of the textual phenomenon is relevant to my own thesis as well. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 193–4, rightly argues that this alternation is not to be used as evidence of multiple sources: “The narrator constantly allows a plurality to act and speak together.”
11. My friend Richard Tupper points out to me that the first possibility (*viz.*, that all three men are Yhwh) is the most likely. He writes (personal communication),

HaShem remains standing before Abe. If HaShem is with Abe, how does He go down and see unless it is by means of the two others with Him? Of course, if we are not literal, HaShem sees by sending angels to be His eyes. But if we are being literal, HaShem must be both with Abe and with the two angels. Moreover, the notion that God has to physically go somewhere on earth to see something also fits in with the notion that God is embodied, and, just as humans have to get closer to something to see it better, so too must God.

For evidence that the two angels who went to Sodem were not called Yhwh, see Breuer, “Messengers,” 382, but for evidence that to some degree they did embody Yhwh, see *Genesis* 18.20–21, and cf. Breuer’s comments on p. 383.

12. On the textual issue, see Rashi’s commentary to *Genesis* 18.22b.
13. Cf. the description of an avatar in Kinsley, “Avatāra,” 14: “Literally the term [*avatār*] means ‘a descent’ and suggests the idea of a deity coming down from heaven to earth.”
14. Jon Levenson points out that Midrash *Tanḥuma Wayyeshev* 2 suggests, not implausibly, that the אִישׁ in *Genesis* 37.15 is an angel. See Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 108.
15. Hebrew, וַיִּהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵי הַמַּבְּרָאֹת יְהוָה וְכָרוּ. By placing “Yhwh” in the first position in this clause and by repeating it, the poetic line emphasizes the word. On this syntactic structure, see Joüon and Muraoka, *JM*, §155nb and o, and cf. §155ne.
16. Cf. Greenberg, *Understanding*, 70, according to whom the term *mal’akh Yhwh* “here, as everywhere, refers to a visible manifestation of Yhwh, essentially indistinguishable from Yhwh himself. . . except that here the manifestation is not anthropomorphic but fiery. There is, then, no special difficulty in the shift from ‘angel’ to Yhwh in verses 2 and 4.”
17. So also, e.g., Greenberg, *Understanding*, 70.
18. So also Kautzsch, *GKC*, §119i, and Childs, *Exodus*, 50.
19. On the connection of this passage to the notion of divine embodiment in wood, see n.113 to this chapter.
20. Unlike MT, LXX uses a third-person verb here, viewing the angel as a separate being, not a small-scale manifestation. LXX does so, however, because of its interpretive nature, not because it reflects an earlier text: LXX’s goal here, as throughout *Exodus* 32–3, is to encourage a smoother or easier reading of a text that is full of gaps and

contradictions. For a discussion of the issues in the versions, see Sommer, “Translation as Commentary,” 47–50. Of course, even if LXX reflected an earlier version, then the change to a first-person verb in MT would still reflect the view that an angel can be a small-scale manifestation of God, rather than an entirely separate being.

21. As noted in von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:287. On the conception of the angel in Exodus 23.20, see especially Cassuto, *Exodus*, *ad loc.* See also Moberly, *Mountain*, 61, and note further Moberly’s more precise presentation of his thesis, 69. On the divine Name here and elsewhere (e.g., Psalms 7.18, 9.3, 20.2–3, 61.9, 92.2, as well as of course Deuteronomy) as a token or hypostasis of divine presence, see the discussion in the next chapter.
22. In both LXX and Targum, the word “angel” is added in this verse to smooth out what seemed to some later readers an inconsistency.
23. Kugel, *God of Old*, 20.
24. On the alternation of ways of referring to Gideon’s interlocutor, an alternation which is strikingly reminiscent of the alternations of ways of referring to Abraham’s interlocutor(s) in Genesis 18, see Breuer, “Messengers,” 384–6.
25. Friedman, *Disappearance*, 12–13 (reprinted as Friedman, *Hidden Face*). On this conception of the angel, see Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:228; Cassuto, *Exodus*, *ad* 23.20. A similar conception of angel is also discussed in Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:23–9, and von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:286–8. Similarly, Kugel, *God of Old*, 30–5, speaks not of an overlap between Yhwh and another being nor of a small-scale manifestation of the deity but of God taking human form. See also Aḥituv, “Countenance,” 9–11. The idea is adumbrated already in Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 159 and 183 n.2. For a fuller list of passages that mention this conception of the angel, see Meier, “Angel.” Not only modern scholars recognized that the term *mal’akh* can refer to an aspect or incarnation of God rather than a separate being; see already Nachmanides’ discussion of this notion of the angel in his commentary on Genesis 18.1, on which see Wolfson, *Speculum*, 63–4. The relationship among the conception of *mal’akh* in many of the passages I discuss is already noticed by Rashbam and ibn Ezra. They shy away from accepting the conclusion that Yhwh is the angel, instead claiming that in these passages, an especially important angel is called Yhwh, after the deity who sent him. (Similarly, when reporting the speech of a captain who is passing on an order of a general, a narrator might write, “The general ordered . . .” even though the general is not present.) See Rashbam on Genesis 18.1 and 18.14 and on Exodus 3.4, as well as ibn Ezra’s Long Commentary on Genesis 18.1 and Exodus 3.4. See further the helpful discussion in Lockshin, *Genesis*, 58–60, who notes some inconsistencies in both Rashbam and ibn Ezra on these verses.
26. Kugel, *God of Old*, 34. Kugel’s explanation for this phenomenon – that “the angel is essentially an illusion, a piece of the supernatural that poses as ordinary reality for a time” – differs from the explanation I lay out in this chapter: that the *mal’akh* evinces the fluidity of divine selfhood and is not illusion, but is a genuine, albeit small-scale, manifestation of God in a particular place.
27. Meier concludes that the term “angel” “is probably a secondary addition to the text in response to changing theological perspectives” (Meier, “Angel,” 55–7), but Friedman’s insight better accounts for the shifting terms and shifting boundaries in all these texts.
28. Von Rad argues, apparently on the basis of MT, that “there is . . . in actual fact a significance in the alternation of ‘Yhwh’ and ‘angel of Yhwh.’ If God is spoken about apart from the men concerned in the story, then the story-teller uses ‘Yhwh’ or ‘God.’ But if

God is spoken about as perceptible to the men in the narrative, the story-teller says בְּלֵאָךְ ה', cf. Genesis xxi7ff.: God hears Hagar's cry, but it is the angel of Yhwh who addresses her" (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:287 n.13). Von Rad's observation suggests that the small-scale manifestation I describe here is designed to be the facet of Yhwh that can be made perceptible to a human being. Cf. Kugel, *God of Old*, 34.

29. For a discussion of Yhwh's heavenly home, see, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:186–94.
30. See the helpful summary by the archaeologist who discovered this inscription, Dever, *Did God*, 131–3. Because of the spelling of the inscription, which does not include vowels, the translation is a matter of controversy. However, the connection of Yhwh and His 'asherah remains clear in any translation. For a convenient edition (with slightly different readings that do not affect the issues under consideration here), see Aḥituv, *Handbook*, 111–13.
31. Research concerning this goddess in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Canaan and Israel has been an unusually fertile field. For a very brief review of nonbiblical and biblical sources, see Wyatt, "Asherah," and John Day, "Asherah." For lengthier surveys of the literature, see Hadley, *Cult*, 11–37; Wiggins, "Asherah Again"; Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 1–20; and John Day, "Asherah (JBL Article)." For a more comprehensive review of the sources, see Olyan, *Asherah*. On Asherah in Israel, it is useful to contrast the approach of Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 153–61, with that of Hadley, *Cult*.
32. The decline of Asherah was part of a larger phenomenon noticeable throughout the Near East in the late Bronze Age: the decline of the prestige of goddesses generally or what might be called the purging of the feminine from the realm of divinity. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 96–7, 128–31, 174–5, document this phenomenon in the Northwest Semitic sphere using iconographic evidence; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 70–80, documents the phenomenon in Mesopotamia using literary evidence. On the decline of Asherah and of goddesses generally in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, see Tigay, "Israelite Religion," 171, and especially Olyan's nuanced discussion of this thesis, Olyan, *Asherah*, 36–7. It may not be coincidental that the cult of Asherah's spouse, the god El, declined among Northwest Semites from the early Iron Age on as well.

But this decline may not have been absolute. Gitin, "Seventh Century," argues that Asherah was worshipped in Philistia in the late seventh century. On the other hand, here too the references may be to the cult object rather than the goddess, leaving the question unsettled.

Incidentally, it should be noticed that one of the great weaknesses of Dever's approach to the status of the 'asherah in ancient Israel is his refusal to confront the widespread evidence of Asherah's decline even as he repeatedly insists, without arguing, that there was a widespread cult of this deity among Iron Age Israelites. Especially revealing is his review of the evidence in Dever, *Did God*, 196–208. Dever never mentions artifactual and textual evidence for Asherah's decline in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, despite the length of his treatment and his references to scholars who present both this artifactual and textual data.

33. For a discussion of all the relevant verses, see Hadley, *Cult*, 63–83, and John Day, "Asherah (JBL Article)," 397–408. Two more speculative examples are of particular interest. On the possibility that the original text of Amos 3.14 also referred to Asherah, see the reviews of the evidence in Paul, *Amos*, *ad loc.*, and Hadley, *Cult*, 77. (Cf. the positive view of Dever, *Did God*, 150.) Even if we emend the text there to read אֲשֶׁרָה (or we understand MT's אֲשֶׁרָה as a deliberate pun alluding to the word אֲשֶׁרָה), it is possible that

the verse refers to the cultic item rather than the name of the goddess; grammatically this possibility is much more likely because the word is in the construct. Similarly, Julius Wellhausen emended Hosea 14.9 so that it mentions both the goddess Anat and Asherah (אֲנַת־וְאֲשֶׁרָה); see Wellhausen, *Kleinen Propheten*, 21, 131, and further discussion in Weinfeld, “Feminine,” 357. It seems more likely that the verse contains two puns that allude to the names of the goddesses (so also John Day, “Asherah [JBL Article],” 404–5) – but even in that case, the words would provide evidence that a northern Israelite in the eighth century knew both terms as divine names. On the other hand, it seems doubtful that Iron Age Israelites would have known of Anat, because her cult had declined after the Bronze Age and is nearly unknown even among Phoenicians; see Mark Smith, *Early*, 6, 61–4, and Van der Toorn, “Anat-Yahu,” 81–3.

34. Mark Smith, *Early*, 92–3, views this verse as the only genuinely clear reference to the goddess in Hebrew scripture.
35. For a review of the literature, see Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 110–11; Hadley, *Cult*, 66–7; John Day, “Asherah (JBL Article),” 400–1.
36. Lipinski, “Syro-Palestinian,” 91 n.14, argues against regarding Asherah as a goddess in ancient Israel, stating, “The only passage in which the term *’āšērā* appears to designate a deity is 1 Kings 18:19, but all critical commentators agree that the words, ‘the four hundred prophets of Asherah’ are interpolated.” The fact of the interpolation is, however, a red herring: Interpolation or not, she is clearly a goddess in this clause (as John Day, “Asherah [JBL Article],” 401, rightly notes). By way of contrast, Montgomery and Gehman, *Kings*, 300, view the phrase as a later addition, but they rightly go on to note that the addition is pertinent and evinces the status of Asherah as a goddess.
37. Garr, *Image*, 76–7.
38. On the importance of this verse, see John Day, “Asherah (JBL Article),” 401.
39. The literature on the term אֲשֶׁרָה in the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions comprises a subdiscipline of its own. For excellent discussions, see especially Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 228–32; the fine summary in Miller, *Religion*, 30; and the especially comprehensive grammatical discussion in Zevit, *Religions*, 403–4, which lays to rest various arguments for translating אֲשֶׁרָה, “and to His Asherah” (where “Asherah” is a proper noun). Zevit goes on to argue that we should read אֲשֶׁרָה not as “His *’asherah*” (i.e., “His wooden cult pole”) but as “Asheratah,” an otherwise unattested divine name; see Zevit, 403–4. Against Zevit, see, e.g., Olyan, *Asherah*, 25. On the possibility that a pronominal suffix attaches to the name of the goddess Anat in a much earlier Ugaritic text, see the painstakingly thorough and potent refutation by Pardee, “Review of Dietrich and Loretz,” and the careful discussion in Hadley, *Cult*, 104–5. For the text itself, see Pardee, *Ritual*, 69–2 and 108–9 n.95. (My thanks to Professor Shalom Paul for bringing the text concerning Anat to my attention.)

We may also note in passing the suggestion of several scholars that the two figures portrayed in the drawing on the first pithos are Yhwh and his consort Asherah. This suggestion is unambiguously wrong; both figures clearly depict the Egyptian deity Bes, as anyone with a passing familiarity with ancient iconographic conventions can see. Indeed, it is doubtful that the inscriptions and the picture of the Bes figures are by the same hand: The writing and the drawings were made by different writing instruments, as indicated by the difference in the width of the respective ink lines. (On the identification of these figures as Bes deities, see Dever, “Asherah,” 25–6, and Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 217–33. On the ink, see Beck, “Drawings,” 42–3, and Keel and Uehlinger, 240. Against

seeing the drawings as relating to the inscriptions, see also John Day, “Asherah [*JBL* Article],” 393 and n.25 there.) On the other hand, the stylized tree on the first pithos may well be a picture of an asherah tree. See especially the discussion in Keel and Uehlinger, 210–33, 240–3; John Day, *Yhwh*, 50–1; and the discussion in n.43 of this chapter. Nevertheless, its relation to the text is suspect, because it is almost certainly the product of a different hand (and, as the ink demonstrates, a different pen).

For scholars who do find the goddess Asherah in these inscriptions, see, e.g., Dever, *Did God*, 164–7, and Dever, “Asherah,” esp. 22–5. Dever’s main evidence comes from the picture of the female seated to the right of the Bes figures, who, he argues, must be the goddess Asherah. However, this drawing is not by the same hand or pen as the inscription and cannot be used to interpret how the author of the inscription understood the terms in question; further, the great variety of drawings on the pithoi suggests that they are unrelated to the texts.

40. On the importance of this circumstance, see Miller, “Absence,” 204.
41. Cf. the conclusion of Olyan, *Asherah*, 1–11, who demonstrates that “biblical evidence from both the north and the south suggests that the *’asherah* was a standard and legitimate part of the cult of Yahweh in non-deuteronomistic circles, probably even among very conservative groups, as the Jehu traditions and the silence of the books of Amos and Hosea seem to indicate” (9). On the acceptance of *’asherah* poles by zealous worshippers of Yhwh, see further Saggs, *Encounter*, 22–3, and Ahlström, *Aspects*, 51. The views of these scholars serve as a corrective to the older view expressed, e.g., in Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:116, 223.
42. The term *’asherah* was applied variously to living trees, tree stumps, and poles; see John Day, “Asherah.” Especially the vocabulary associated with this object shows it to be made of wood; see the discussion in McCarter, “Aspects,” 146. Both the Mishna and the LXX understood the term to refer to sacred trees or even sacred groves. See the discussions in Zevit, *Religions*, 263–5, and Olyan, *Asherah*, 2–3. On the possibility of live trees serving as a dwelling for divinity, see also Eliade, *Patterns*, 271–2.
43. On the *’asherah* as the sacred tree known from many Israelite and Phoenician seals, see the extensive discussion of Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 233–6. The seals do not specify that the trees they illustrate are called *’asherot*. The only object that may explicitly link an illustration of such a tree with the term *’asherah* is Pithos A from Kuntillet Ajrud (but see my reservations on linking the textual and iconographic evidence from this pithos in n.39 of this chapter). The similarity between the tree on that pithos and the sacred trees on the seals is pronounced: The tree in both sets of data has elaborate and symmetrical leafy branches and is flanked on each side by a creature (usually bovine, sometimes bovine with wings). Cf. illustrations 219, 231a, and 231b in Keel and Uehlinger, pp. 211 and 235.
44. For drawings of the coins, see Mettinger, *No Graven*, 96, and Zevit, *Religions*, 258. The conjoining of sacred tree and stone pillar is also known among Punic settlements of Tyrian origin as far afield as Gades, Spain; see Mettinger, “Conversation,” 284–5. Similarly, archaeologists uncovered several stelae alongside the remains of a cedar tree in the high place of a Middle Bronze sanctuary in Qatna; see Mettinger, *No Graven* 118–19. For a possible Judean example of a sanctuary (in Lachish) with stelae next to tree stumps, see Mettinger, *No Graven*, 151, and Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 73.
45. In 1.9.29 and 1.1010 (=Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 30–3 and 42–3).
46. See Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 73, as well as Mettinger, *No Graven*, 151.

47. On *’asherahs* and stelae as originally manifesting the presence of goddesses and gods, respectively, see Broshi, “*Maṣṣēbā*,” 5:223; Albertz, *History*, 1:85. In Greece as well, trees were particularly associated with goddesses. See Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 86.
48. As rightly noted in Albertz, *History*, 1:275 n.112 (an important point that rather militates against Albertz’s own interpretation on 1:86).
49. Hadley, *Cult*, 77–83, traces how the *’asherah* evolved from a goddess and consort of El (e.g., in Ugarit) into the goddess and consort of Yhwh in Israel. She also traces how the cultic pole sacred to Asherah in Israel became a cultic pole sacred to Yhwh alone.
50. Cf. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 231–6, who arrive at the same conclusion on the basis of other arguments, and Mark Smith, *Early*, 92–4. In a later work, Smith makes the crucial point that various Israelites at any given time may have regarded a given *’asherah* in many different ways; see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 74. A few of the biblical authors who condemn the *’asherah* in the Jerusalem temple (e.g., 2 Kings 23.4) may have seen it as a symbol or manifestation of a goddess, though many of them probably did not know the term *’asherah* as a divine name. Others regarded the *’asherah* as legitimate, seeing it as a symbol or manifestation of Yhwh. Discussing the gilded wood reliefs of palm trees in the Jerusalem temple (see 1 Kings 6.29ff., Ezekiel 40.16ff., 1 Chronicles 3.5), Bloch-Smith, “Solomon’s,” 86, points out that “there is no iconographic indication either in specific details or in general context to suggest that the trees carved on the Temple walls and doors symbolized either Asherah or Hathor.” Perhaps we can term these trees *’asherot*, but this does not mean they were sacred to Asherah.
51. In Kuntillet Ajrud, the verbs are active: *וּלְאִשְׁרָתָהּ. שְׁמַרְןָ לַיְיָהוָה. אַתְּכֶם. בְּרַכְתָּם.* in the first pithos, and *וּלְאִשְׁרָתָהּ. תִּמְנֶן. לַיְיָהוָה. בְּרַכְתֶּךָ.* in the second. In Khirbet el-Qom, the verb is probably passive: *בְּרַךְ. אֲרִיָּהוּ. לַיְיָהוָה. וּמִצְרִיָּהוּ. וּלְאִשְׁרָתָהּ.* though one might read the first verb as a masculine singular imperative, *בְּרַךְ*. The meaning is the same in all three texts: The human is blessed by another human’s words to Yhwh and His *’asherah*.
52. See, e.g., John Day, *Yhwh*, 52: “The Asherah cult symbol rather than the goddess Asherah directly is the source of blessing alongside Yahweh.” Cf. Miller, *Religion*, 36; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 237.
53. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 237, point out the singular verbs.
54. One might be tempted to argue that we can vocalize the verb as a plural (*וַיְרַךְ*), but in eighth-century Hebrew, final u-class vowels are indicated with a *mater lexiōnis*, as indeed the name *אֲמֵרִיו* in this pithos itself demonstrates.
55. The evidence is not quite as clear here, because one might want to regard the verb not as a third-person masculine singular converted affix form (*וַיְרַךְ*) but as an infinitive absolute with a jussive force (*וַיְרַךְ*). A closer examination renders the latter possibility unlikely. The infinitive absolute can function in place of a finite verb in two situations: (1) It functions as a finite verb at the beginning of a sentence. This usage cannot appear here for two reasons. First, the form *וַיְרַךְ* does not seem to be at the beginning of a sentence, though the fragmentary nature of the text and the ambiguous nature of the words *הָיָה דָּא* immediately before *וַיְרַךְ* render a definite statement impossible. Second, T. Muraoka points out that when the infinitive absolute occurs in place of a finite form at the beginning of a sentence, it is used only as with an imperative, future, present, or past sense, but not in place of the jussive; see Joüon and Muraoka, *JM*, §123w n.1. The few apparent exceptions adduced by Bergsträsser, *Grammatik*, II§112kd, are all examples of what Muraoka calls the injunctive future, which is limited to divine commands found in Pentateuchal legislation. Hence, Bergsträsser’s examples neither

apply to our case (which does not record a divine command) nor overturn Muraoka's more general observation. (2) The infinitive absolute can also appear within a sequence of verbs as the equivalent of the preceding form, including a jussive; see Joüon-Muraoka §123x. Though primarily limited to exilic and postexilic Hebrew texts, this usage may have been present in preexilic northern Hebrew (according to the speculation of Cyrus Gordon, on the basis of its appearance in Ugaritic and Phoenician; see Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, §9.29). Given that Kuntillet Ajrud seems to have been an Israelite, rather than Judean, caravan station, the presence of a possible feature of northern Hebrew cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, this use of the infinitive absolute in our inscription remains unlikely for two reasons. First, there does not seem to be any previous jussive, so far as we can tell from the fragment. Second, this use of the infinitive absolute usually occurs in hurried, excited speech (see Waldman, *Recent*, 42, and references there). Thus, this usage seems stylistically unlikely in a written inscription.

56. Unlike the *šalmu* or betyl, then, the *'asherah* does not seem to have its own divine identity. My conclusion here disagrees specifically with McCarter, "Aspects," whose clear presentation nevertheless is enormously helpful in the way it frames the issue.
57. See Donner and Röllig, *KAI*, Nr. 12 (1:2 and 2:16–17).
58. See further W. Robertson Smith, *Religion*, 193–4, and also n.113 in this chapter.
59. Given the close association of stelae and the cult of deified ancestors in Phoenician sources, it is noteworthy that Saul and his sons are buried under a tamarisk tree (1 Samuel 31.13), with which he seems to have been closely linked in Israelite memory (1 Samuel 22.6).
60. See my discussion of Jehu's reform, p. 46.
61. See references in n.41 of this chapter, and see further Zevit, *Religions*, 261–2.
62. For a stimulating discussion of the consonance between biblical and postbiblical language that link God with stone, see Gruenwald, "God the Stone."
63. The questions of whether such a period ever existed and, if so, whether Genesis 28, 31, and 35 accurately reflect its religious practices are not relevant to my discussion. As Rainer Albertz rightly points out, the patriarchal religion portrayed in Genesis is neither a preliminary stage of Israelite religion nor a complete fabrication by the authors of Genesis. Rather, patriarchal religion represents a substratum of Israelite religion as it existed in the Iron Age – specifically, the realm of personal and family piety (Albertz, *History*, 1:29). Consequently, these passages are an important witness to one stream within Israelite religion, regardless of when that stream came into existence.
64. Genesis 35.9–15 stem primarily from P, but the single verse from this passage relevant to our concerns, 35.14, stems from J. See especially the remarks of Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:56; Dillmann, *Genesis*, 378; and Wellhausen, *Composition*, 322.
65. Savran, *Encountering*, 63, points out the important repetition of the root נצב in this narrative: Jacob sees a ladder set (מַצְבָּה) into the ground, on the top of which God stands (נִצָּב). God's presence above leads Jacob to set up the מַצְבָּה or stele below. Savran's point meshes well with my suggestion that this passage describes a case of the transcendent God who נִצָּב (stands), allowing Himself to become immanent below in a מַצְבָּה (stele).
66. On anointing as a transformative ritual in biblical, Canaanite, and Mesopotamian texts, see Liver, "Mēšihâ," and the comprehensive treatment by Kutsch, *Salbung*. Several of Kutsch's examples make especially clear that anointing functioned as what we may term a performative utterance (or rather, performative symbolic act); for example, by

- anointing, a master can set a slave free, and a man can wed a woman (Kutsch, 16–19, 27–33). Not only humans but at times cultic objects could be anointed (Kutsch, 70–1).
67. Various midrashim emphasize that the oil came directly down on the stone from heaven (*Genesis Rabbah* 69.7 [in the printed edition]; *Pirque deRabbi Eliezer* 35; additional sources cited in Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 5:1144 §135–6). The insistence in these midrashim that the oil was divine in origin recalls the insistence of the *pīt pī* incantations that the artisan did not create the statue but that its origin was heavenly. It also recalls the claims that the tree from which the wood for the *šalmu* came was divine even before the artisans chose it. On those claims in the Mesopotamian sources, see Hurowitz, “Make Yourself,” 343–4.
 68. The connection between Jacob’s intention in this verse (*viz.*, to draw the divine presence into the object) and the description of betyls in Philo of Byblos was already noticed by Benamozegh, *’Em Lamiqra*, 1:92a. (Benamozegh refers specifically to Sachunyaton, whose older work on Phoenician religion Philo of Byblos claims to render into Greek.)
 69. For the text, see Dietrich, Loretz, and Mayer, “Sikkanum ‘Betyle,’” 134, and Fleming, *Installation*, 17 and 52 (lines 34–5).
 70. See lines 3 and 20 of the program.
 71. Fleming, *Installation*, 146, points out the rarity of this oil in the festival.
 72. Faur, “Biblical,” 11–12, proposes a similar interpretation of the biblical phrase אֵלֶּהָ מִסְכָּה (Exodus 34.17, Leviticus 19.4) as well as the phrase עֵגֶל מִסְכָּה (Exodus 32.4, Deuteronomy 9.12). Following Benamozegh, *’Em Lamiqra*, 2:89a–b, Faur connects the noun מִסְכָּה to the verbal root נִסַּךְ, not in the sense of pouring out molten metal (as all other lexicographers do; see, e.g., Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 651a), but as “pouring out” in the sense of “anointing.” (In support of this theory, we might also note the noun נִסִּיךְ in the sense of “prince, leader” [e.g., in Joshua 13.21, Micah 5.4], which turns out to be an exact equivalent of the term מְשִׁיחַ.) Thus, Faur suggests that the *’egel massekhah* in Exodus 32 was a statue of a calf that had been anointed in a ceremony functionally parallel to the Mesopotamian *pīt pī*. Faur’s observation about the calf is equally relevant to the *maššebah* anointed by Jacob in Genesis 28. In support of this line of reasoning, it is relevant to note that Philo of Byblos also links libation in connection with stelae, though in his case the libation involves blood rather than oil. See 1.10.10 (=Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 42–3).
 73. Cf. Liver, “*Mēšīḥā*,” 529, who argues that, by anointing the stone, Jacob changed its status so that it was no longer just a stone. Liver does not specify what it became, however.
 74. That is, בֵּית־אֵל is understood to mean בְּבֵית־אֵל. On the assimilation of the preposition ב into the first letter of a word that begins with ב or פ, see Joüon and Muraoka, *JM*, §126h. LXX and Targumim, either unaware of this possibility or disturbed by it, add the words “who appeared to you” after “I am the God,” thus removing the divine presence from the stele itself and making clear that בֵּית־אֵל is a geographic reference. Incidentally, the one translation of the verse that is impossible is the most common one (found, e.g., in NJPS, KJV, RSV, NRSV, etc.): “I am the God of Bethel,” which assumes that the noun “God” (הָאֵל) is in the construct. As Skinner notes, this syntax is impossible, because the first noun in a construct chain cannot have the definite article (see Skinner, *Genesis*, 395).
 75. In fact, Alexander Rofé argues persuasively that the word שָׁם in 31.13 and the references to Bethel as a place name are secondary additions to these texts; originally, they referred

unambiguously to the god Bethel, who was present in the stone pillar. Subsequently, this divine name (or this divinity) fell into disfavor in Israel, and the texts were reworked so that the word Bethel clearly meant the city, not the god. See Rofé, *Belief*, 226–31.

76. So W. Robertson Smith, *Religion*, 204–5.
77. Rofé regards Bethel as distinct from Yhwh, at least originally, though the two eventually tended to merge. See Rofé, *Belief*, 230–2. However, in light of the fluidity I discuss here, it is not simply the case that Bethel was or was not Yhwh; rather, for the Israelites, Bethel was a particular embodiment of Yhwh, capable of some independence from Yhwh yet not entirely distinct. Van der Toorn, “Anat-Yahu,” 94, demonstrates that “Yahu and Bethel were practically identified with each other at Elephantine” in the fifth century. He goes on to argue that their identification there was the work of Aramean refugees, not Israelites, but it is likely that the identification of Yhwh and Bethel at Elephantine, whether by Arameans or Israelites, was made easier by a more ancient identification of two deities of this name in Israel itself before the exile.
78. Saggs, *Encounter*, 23.
79. See also Zevit, *Religions*, 259–61, and Eliade, *Patterns*, 229–31.
80. On this verse and its connection to the traditions of a stele found in stories concerning Jacob at Bethel, see Rofé, *Belief*, 226–7. Rofé argues that this description of God reflects the notion that Israel’s God was embodied in stone; this notion was embraced especially by the Ephraimites who are responsible for the poem in 49.22–6 and for the traditions concerning the shrine in Bethel (which was, after all, an Ephraimite city). On the possibility that the term can be a divine name or epithet, recall the Akkadian *abnu* and the references in [Chapter 1](#) n.119.
81. Multiple stelae could be sacred to a single deity, as noted by W. Robertson Smith, *Religion*, 210–12, and by Mettinger, *No Graven*, 98 (a circumstance overlooked by Dever, *Did God*, 175; by Mazar, *Archaeology*, 497; and by Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 78). We see later several cases of multiple stelae grouped together in Israelite archaeological sites.
82. The significance of this verb is also noted by Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 179.
83. In Judges 9.6, the tree is described as a turpentine tree (אֵלֹן) rather than the oak (אֵלֶךְ) of Joshua 24.26. The word אֵלֹן in Joshua 24.26 could easily be confused with אֵלֶךְ, another term for turpentine tree. In fact, Joshua 24.26 contains the Bible’s only occurrence of the word אֵלֶךְ (as opposed to אֵלֹן, the more common word for oak). The confusion of names is not surprising, because the terms in Hebrew are similar; the various words for oak and turpentine tree tend to be interchanged to some degree. On this interchange, see Zohari, “*Élâ, ’élôn,*” and Zohari, “*Allôn.*”
84. As noted by Skinner, *Genesis*, 416, who points out the similarity of this altar to a *maṣṣebah*.
85. The verb ἐπικαλέω in the middle voice means “call on, invoke.”
86. On Shalom (“Peace”) as an epithet of Yhwh, see b. *Shabbat* 10b, which bases the view that Shalom is a name of God on this verse from Judges. On Shalom/Shalem as a divine name in Ugarit and in Akkadian texts (which may underlie the place name “Jerusalem” as well as the personal name “Absalom”), see Huffmon, “Shalem.”
87. The extraordinary pun in this line, which can also be translated, “Israel is an empty vine, which levels itself,” does not affect the point under consideration.
88. More precisely, Exodus 20.4 is the Second Commandment according to the division of the Ten Commandments that is the norm among most Protestant and Orthodox

Christians; it is the second part of the Second Statement according to the division of the Ten Statements most common among Jews; and it is the third part of the First Commandment according to Catholics and Lutherans. For a summary of the varied ways of dividing this text into ten parts, see W. Sibley Towner, “Ten,” 1033b, and the convenient enumeration in Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 243–4. Note that what Towner identifies as the Orthodox and (non-Lutheran) Protestant method is identical to what Weinfeld identifies as that of Philo, Josephus, and the Church Fathers.

89. See Mettinger, *No Graven*, 135–97; see especially 190–1 and 193–3. On this persuasive thesis and its critics, see further Mettinger, “Aniconism”; Mettinger, “Conversation”; Hendel, “Aniconism”; and Lewis, “Divine Images.” On the applicability of the idea of aniconism in Solomon’s temple, see further Bloch-Smith, “Solomon’s,” 91–2. Some scholars have suggested of late that Israelite worship, even in the official cult, was not originally aniconic; see, for example, van der Toorn, “Israelite Figurines,” as well as Becking, “Return”; Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic”; and Herbert Niehr, “Search.” Against these highly suspect claims, see, in addition to the essays by Mettinger and Hendel cited earlier in this note, Sasson, “Use of Images.”
90. That the noun *’eloheka* here is plural is clear from the plural verb and pronoun. See further Donner, “Hier sind,” 45–7.
91. This explanation does not contradict or supplant another explanation: To wit, the text in Exodus uses the plural because it alludes to the story of the two calves Jeroboam set up, one in Bethel and one in Dan (1 Kings 12.28–29). On the relationship between the stories of Aaron’s calf and Jeroboam’s calves, see Aberbach and Smolar, “Aaron.” For a discussion of the relation of both passages to Hosea and other northern traditions that differs somewhat from the approach taken here, see Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 77–85.
92. Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 81–2, claims that the E stories in Exodus 32–3 and Numbers 12 attack the theology found in the story of Jacob’s dream at Bethel. These stories, according to Knohl, dismiss several elements that were viewed positively in Genesis 31: the angel, the calves, and the dream revelation. In fact, Exodus 32–3 and other JE texts such as Numbers 12 remain in agreement with Genesis 31. The story in Exodus 32–3 attacks only the calves, not the *mal’akh* or dreams. It is true, as Knohl notes, that God accompanies the people only in the form of the *mal’akh* in Exodus 33.3, but God’s decision in this verse reflects God’s anger with the nation, not a criticism of *mal’akh* theology. Similarly, the poem in Numbers 12.6–8 informs us that dreams are, relatively speaking, an inferior form of revelation, but it does not reject this form of revelation. On the contrary, it maintains that all legitimate prophets after or before Moses receive revelations through dreams. The point of these verses is to inform us that the form of revelation vouchsafed to Moses was greater than that vouchsafed to any prophet, not to demean dream revelations such as Jacob’s at Bethel. In short, all these passages (Genesis 31, Exodus 32–3, and Numbers 12, as well as Hosea) respect the *mal’akh* and dreams (while seeing them as lesser forms of divine accessibility) and reject the calves. The Bethel theology reflected in all these texts endorses the notions of fluidity and multiple embodiment in nonrepresentational objects while condemning the use of representational objects in worship.
93. Here, I follow the careful reading of the passage from 1 Kings 12 in Donner, “Hier sind,” 45–8.
94. For older reviews of the sites, see Broshi, “*Maṣṣēbā*,” 5:221–5, and in greater detail, Mettinger, *No Graven*, 140–74. It must be admitted that scholars tended to find *maṣṣebot*

- more frequently than a sober reevaluation of the archaeological evidence warrants, as Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” has pointed out. Even after eliminating the doubtful cases, she identifies a substantial number of stelae from ancient Israel.
95. Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 74–5, considers this a genuine case of a stele, not one of the many cases in which a rock was misidentified as a stele.
 96. Dever, *Did God*, 167–70. To avoid misunderstanding, let me make clear that Dever is not claiming that the stories in Joshua 24 and Judges 9 are historically accurate or even that the characters they describe really existed. Rather, he means that the authors of those two texts may well have had in mind the large and presumably famous stele of the grand temple at Shechem when they composed those stories.
 97. See Mazar, *Archaeology*, 350–2, and Dever, *Did God*, 135–6. This stele is unusual in that it is placed horizontally rather than vertically on the ground. A bronze bull figurine was also found at the site; one might connect this either with the god Baal or (on the basis of descriptions of what biblical authors consider to be an errant form of Yhwhistic worship in Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 12.25–33) with Yhwh. For a detailed defense of the Israelite identification of the site, see Mazar, “Bull Site.” Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 75, considers this a genuine case.
 98. On the identification of these stones as genuine *maṣṣebot*, see Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 73–4.
 99. Dever, *Did God*, 151 (with a picture of the stelae on 152), 154–5.
 100. See Mazar, *Archaeology*, 496–8; Dever, *Did God*, 173–5; Zevit, *Religions*, 156–71, esp. 168–9, who speaks of two *maṣṣebot* being replaced by a single *maṣṣebah* in the eighth century; Miriam Aharoni, “Arad,” 1:83, who speaks of three *maṣṣebot*. Gabriel Barkay identifies the smaller slab as an altar and speaks of only one stele in his discussion in Ben-Tor, *Archaeology*, 342. The association of the stelae with the niche is speculative, because they were found buried under the floor of the temple; in any event, it is clear both that the stelae were present in the temple and that they were removed and hidden at some point, apparently when objects of this time came to be seen as improper for Israelite worship. Whether this occurred in the eighth century B.C.E. (as the excavator, Yohanan Aharoni claims) or later (see the discussion in Barkay, 342 and 362) is not relevant to our concerns. Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 76–7, notes that additional *maṣṣebot* may have been located in these rooms as well, though they were not all present in the room in any one period. She considers these examples to be genuine cases of stelae.
 101. See Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 72–3.
 102. Dever, *Did God*, 118, and see his more specific references on 115. Dever also refers to various smaller *maṣṣebot* in Megiddo, but Bloch-Smith, “Will the Real,” 67–9, explains why the identification of the various slabs in Megiddo as *maṣṣebot* is doubtful at best.
 103. See Albertz, *History*, 1:29.
 104. My assertion that the JE traditions embrace both the *maṣṣebah* and *’asherah* requires me to address two verses in Exodus that do not belong to P and thus might be assumed to belong to JE. Exodus 23.24 orders the Israelites to shatter the Canaanites’ *maṣṣebot*, and 34.13 requires them to destroy the Canaanites’ altars, *maṣṣebot*, and *’asherim*. If these verses in fact belonged to J or E, my thesis would suffer a severe blow. As scholars have long recognized, however, these verses are glosses made by deuteronomistic editors of the Book of Exodus or scribes influenced by Deuteronomy’s ideology, and

perhaps specifically by Deuteronomy 7.5, whose linguistic resemblance to Exodus 23.24 and 34.13 is pronounced. A defense of this assertion is warranted.

Both verses that concern us are surrounded by JE verses, but in each case the source critical divide between the surrounding material and the verses themselves is evident. In 34.11, God announces that He (and not, as in D, the Israelites) will drive the Canaanites out of the land; but in 34.12–16, the Canaanites are still in the land, so that the Israelites, to avoid being ensnared by them, must destroy their stelae and *'asherahs*. Both the language of 34.12–16 and the situation presupposed are those of D, whereas 34.11 and its direct continuation in 34.17 fit the conception of JE. Similarly, in 23.23 and 23.27–8, God announces that His *mal'akh* and the natural phenomena He sends (again, not the Israelites) will annihilate the Canaanites – a conception identical to that in 34.11–15 and different from D. In between these verses, in 23.24, we find thoroughly deuteronomistic language and conceptions, and it is there that the stelae are condemned. (On the importance of the question of who expels the Canaanites, divinely sent natural phenomena or the Israelites, see Weinfeld, *Promise*, 76–98.)

The conclusion that 23.24 and 34.13 belong to a deuteronomistic insertion is not only supported by recent critics who are quick to find deuteronomistic material in Genesis-Numbers and who doubt the existence of J and E (e.g., Blum, *Studien*, 69–70, 354, and Carr, “Method,” who regard all of the legal material in 34 as late and not J). Even earlier critics who believe in J and E and are hesitant to see later additions in them also regard the verses in question as deuteronomistic and not original to J or E. Thus, Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:118, regard 24.20–2, 25b–6, 28–31 as E, but point out that the block of material in 24.23–5a and 27 “does not seem to belong to the context where it interrupts the enunciation of the divine promises to Israel^{22 25b 26}; the demand for the destruction of the consecrated pillars can hardly proceed from the writer who immediately after describes Moses as erecting twelve^{24.4} and who narrated the origin of the pillars at Bethel and Galeed^{Gen 28.18, 31.45}; while the affinities with D point clearly to editorial amplification.”

Similarly, Childs, *Exodus*, 460, points out striking similarities between this concluding section of the Covenant Code (23.20–33) and Deuteronomy 7, which he attributes to common use of an older oral tradition from deuteronomistic circles. This whole section is, Childs notes (486), “strikingly different in its style from that which precedes In both its form and content this homily is closely parallel to Deut. 7.” Some scholars regard the whole of 23.20–33, including the sections concerning the *mal'akh*, to be a late addition of deuteronomistic provenance. For example, Noth, *Exodus*, 192, suggests that the addition in 23.20–33 “appears gradually to have grown to the form in which it has been transmitted, [and] bears a generally deuteronomistic stamp in style and content.” In fact, however, the bulk of the material in 23.20–33 is substantially different from D: The conception of the angel is totally lacking in D, and in D the Israelites themselves are to annihilate the Canaanites, whereas here it is God who sends the hornet and the terror to expel them (as noted by Weinfeld, *Promise*, 88). The material that sounds so similar to D is in specific verses, especially 23.23–5 – precisely the verses that concern us.

Similarly, Noth notes (262) additions in 34.11b–13 in deuteronomistic language, but the real break occurs between 11 and 12 (in the former, God expels the Canaanites; in the latter, they are still there), not between 11a and 11b. On D's influence on Exodus 34, see detailed discussion in Ginsberg, *Israelian*, 64. Ginsberg points out that

- “Exod 34:13 . . . agrees with Deut 7:5 in being formulated in the second person plural in the midst of a patch of second person singulars.” He further notes (as have others) that 34.24 presupposes a centralized cult. On the secondary nature of some material in 34.10–16, see also Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:134–5, who recognizes an original J core and later expansions.
- In short, the Sinai material in Exodus, including JE passages, especially seems to have attracted later hands. On D and, more rarely, P insertions in Exodus verses describing laws revealed at Sinai, one need only note the clearly deuteronomistic nature of the text of the Decalogue in Exodus 20; see Toeg, *Lawgiving*, 67, and references there.
105. Contra, e.g., Gunkel, *Genesis*, 449, who attempts to read the first two lines as referring to God and the third to a divine servant, thus weakening the tight three-part parallelism that Gunkel himself acknowledges as typical of this sort of blessing formula in ancient Near Eastern literature (448–9). Further, note that the first three lines all introduce a subject, and the verb in the third line, which finally provides the predicate, is singular, thus indicating that the nouns in all three lines (God, God, *mal'akh*) are identical.
106. See Ramban's commentary to 48.15, which points out the linkage among 31.13, 35.3, and 48.16, as well as Exodus 23.21 (which mentions the *mal'akh* that encompasses God's name or *shem*, which is manifestly identical to God Himself). For the equation of the *mal'akh* in 31.13 and 48.16, see also Rashi's commentary to 48.16 (who, however, regards the single *mal'akh* of 31.13 and 48.16 as an angel or messenger rather than a manifestation); Ginsberg, “Hosea's Ephraim,” 342; Rofé, *Belief*, 236–8; Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 78.
107. Thus these manifestations are in part the result of divine grace. Cf. the statement of Moshe Greenberg in a somewhat different context, discussing dialogue between God and humanity: “The first condition of such dialogue is God's willingness to adjust himself to the capacities of men, to take into consideration and make concessions to human frailty” (Greenberg, *Understanding*, 94).
108. Or, “he cried and pleaded with Him.” The ambiguity is probably deliberate.
109. The presence of “Bethel” in the first position in this clause rather than the verb indicates emphasis. On this syntactic structure, see Joüon and Muraoka, *JM*, §155 nb and o, and cf. §155 ne. It becomes evident in the next poetic half-line (“There He spoke”) that “Bethel” also refers to the place; thus, this poetic line is a case of Janus parallelism, in which “Bethel” is parallel to the third person pronoun referring to God in the previous line, “there” in the next line, and finally “Yhwh” in the line after that. (On Janus parallelism, see, briefly, Watson, *Classical*, 159, and in greater detail Paul, “Polysensuous.”)
110. Reading with most manuscripts of LXX πρὸς αὐτόν (which would be the equivalent of Hebrew עִמּוֹ; Vaticanus and Venetus and some recensions of the Hexapla read αὐτούς, which would be equivalent to עִמָּם, itself perhaps an error for MT's עִמּוֹ, where נו has become ׁ). MT's עִמּוֹ is probably the product of a scribal or recital error at the end of this verset resulting from the analogy of the word מִצְרָיִם at the end of the immediately preceding verset.
111. In understanding the term “Bethel” in Hosea 12.5 as a divine name, I follow Ginsberg, “Hosea's Ephraim.” I depart, however, from his suggestions that (1) the angel Bethel to whom Hosea refers was a being subordinate to Yhwh and (2) the passage excoriates Jacob and the Israelites for relying on that lower ranking deity rather than praying

- to Yhwh. I reject this aspect of Ginsberg's interpretation for two reasons. First, this aspect of his interpretation only works well for the text as he reconstructs it, and I find his far-reaching textual emendations too speculative to form the basis for an interpretation. Second, his interpretation is based on the notion that an angel must be a being distinct from God. Once we realize that *mal'akh* can also refer to a small-scale manifestation of God, the alleged contrast between the angel/Bethel and Yhwh in the passage disappears, and the poem can be read sensibly as it stands without recourse to radical emendation.
112. One other verse also attests to the notion that the God of Israel could be called Bethel: Jeremiah 48.13. On the identification of Yhwh and Bethel among the colonists in fifth-century Elephantine, see Van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu," 94, and my remarks in n.77 of this chapter.
113. The two conceptions of the divine – fluidity of self and multiplicity of embodiment – may also come together in Exodus 3.2. There, Yhwh appears in a small-scale manifestation known as the מלאך, and this fluid manifestation is a flame located in a bush that it does not consume. That the flame does not consume the bush suggests that the presence of God overlaps with the bush (or supplements it) without taking its place; the מלאך that is God dwells in or is embodied by the bush. As Savran, *Encountering*, 64–9, astutely points out, the identity of the bush and the מלאך is clear from the two uses of the root ראָה in the verse. The first half of the verse provides us with the narrator's perspective: God appears (וַיֵּרָא, the *niphal* of the verbal root) as a flame. The second half provides us with the character's perspective of the same event: Moses saw (וַיִּרְא, the *qal* of the same root) the bush. Thus, the מלאך is the subject of the middle or passive form of the root, whereas the bush is the object of the transitive form of the root, a circumstance that shows their identity, at least at this particular moment. Of course, the bush here recalls various trees as embodiments of God, and it may even hint toward the menorah as a (flame-topped) sign of God's presence. (On the connection of the bush and the menorah, see n.102 in Chapter 3).
114. See Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 247; Aḥituv, *Handbook*, 152. The northern provenance of the station's builders and users is not fully clear, however; see Zevit, *Religions*, 376–9.
115. It may be relevant to recall that the same conception of the angel appears also in the story in Exodus 3–4 about Moses – who was the ancestor of the priestly dynasty that served in the northern sanctuary in Dan (see Judges 18.30 and commentaries to that passage, where the unusually written word מִיִּשָׁה clearly stands for מִשָּׁה). On the other hand, our other story about Moses' commissioning, from the southern-oriented P source (Exodus 6–7), lacks this motif. In this source, Aaron (whom the southern, Jerusalem priests regarded as their ancestor) plays a more prominent role.
116. Many scholars have argued that the E source stems from northern Israel. A convenient and brief overview of the evidence is found in Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 1:116–17; for a more recent example, see the clear collection of evidence and original arguments in Friedman, *Who Wrote*, 61–9, and also 79–83. For a more specific argument, according to which E was written in the court of the northern monarch Jeroboam, see Coote, *In Defense*. Coote's thesis fits my own argument well, but I regard his attempts to date and locate E so precisely as overly speculative.

3: THE REJECTION OF THE FLUIDITY MODEL IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

1. My terminology here differs from that of Martin Noth and Frank Moore Cross, who use “Deuteronomic” more narrowly to refer to the core of the Book of Deuteronomy, reserving the term “Deuteronomistic” for the historical books (Joshua-Kings). See Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 274 n.1. Because I use the term “deuteronomic” more broadly to refer to material found in several books, I do not capitalize the term. By “Deuteronomistic,” I mean specifically the historical books (Joshua-Kings); this usage is similar to that of Noth and Cross. Similarly, I use D to refer to the authors responsible for most of the Book of Deuteronomy (but not for most of the material in its last few chapters), whereas I use Dtr to refer to the editors responsible for Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.
2. On the abbreviations PT and HS, see Knohl, *Sanctuary*.
3. On the term “Name” in the Hebrew Bible (both in deuteronomic literature and in other traditions), see especially McBride, “Deuteronomic,” *passim*, esp. 67–118, 208; Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 48, 124–31; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 193–8; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:208, and 2:40–5. On the critique of Name theology by Richter, *Deuteronomistic*, 14–22, see n.101 in [Chapter 1](#).
4. Discussing passages such as these, Wevers, “Study,” 83–4, rightly notes, “One can praise the name of the deity as well as the deity himself, since the name is often identified with the self.”
5. To be sure, in this verse, the phrase *נִקְרָא שֵׁם עַל* is an idiom denoting God’s ownership of the people, but the use of an idiom with the phrase *[שֵׁם =] שִׁמְךָ* parallel to a verset that speaks of God as present in the people’s midst remains suggestive.
6. My definition of hypostasis follows McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 5. Cf. Ringgren, *Word*, 8, for whom a hypostasis may or may not be regarded as a person. On the two-sided nature of the concept of name, see also the fine summary of G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 70–1: “Of course, the conception of ‘the Name’ has a long history in the ancient world. Name and essence were so intermingled that in pagan settings the two could be completely identified or the name in its own right could be separated and given mythological significance and revered.”
7. A similar usage appears in Psalm 75.2 in the MT.
8. The former understanding (to wit, that *shem* here refers to God Himself) is found in NJPS; cf. Radaq, and note the presence of fiery imagery that normally accompanies God. For the latter understanding (to wit, that the term is intended to distance God from the angry theophany to some degree), see ibn Ezra, who identifies the *shem* with an angel, and Eliezer of Beaugency, who glosses *shem* as “His reputation.” Similarly, Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 57, identifies the *shem* in this verse as an angel, more specifically a *seraph*, because the fiery lips and tongue of the *shem* here match the description of the *seraphim* in Isaiah 6 and Psalm 140. Commenting on this verse, Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:43–4, presents the latter sort of interpretation and attributes it to a post-Isaianic hand; but he points out (citing Isaiah 9.7) that Isaiah did not object to portraying God as intervening directly when angry. Thus Eichrodt provides good support for the first interpretation, especially if one is not convinced that a later hand has altered chapter 30.
9. See McBride, “Deuteronomic,” 208. The Hebrew *בְּכָל־הַמְּקוֹמִים* refers to a plurality of locations. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 481, section 1b, and cf. Exodus 1.22, 20.24, etc. See also the helpful discussion in Childs, *Exodus*, 447.

10. The literature on the term כבוד is extensive. Of particular importance are the fundamental article by Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies”; Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 116–20, 131–2; Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 81–123. A good overview is available in Fossum, “Glory.”
11. On the term meaning “body,” “person,” or “self,” see Ginsberg, “Gleanings,” 46–7, and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 202.
12. Against the assumption that the *kabod* always refers to the brilliantly shining divine body, see Aster, “Phenomenon,” 341–87, esp. 346–51.
13. See, e.g., Exodus 19.18, Psalm 104.2. On passages such as these and their connections to the extraordinary divine light in Akkadian literature, see, briefly, Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 131–2, and especially the classic study by Cassin, *Splendeur*. These should be read in light of the more nuanced discussion of the relationship between the biblical and Mesopotamian materials in Aster, “Phenomenon,” 387–96.
14. A Ugaritic text that lists divine qualities, KTU 1.123 line 16, also attests to the association of *kabod* with fire and light: *kbd w nr*. See further Mark Smith, *Origins*, 76, who further notes the similar association of terms in Psalm 18.13 (=1 Samuel 22.13), Ezekiel 10.4, and Habakkuk 3.4.
15. See Fishbane, *Haftarot*, 475 n.3.
16. Aster, “Phenomenon,” 351–3, argues that the *kabod* in Exodus 33.18–23 is not radiant. In fact, the passage gives no clear indication of what the *kabod* looks like. The fact that Moses had to be shielded from seeing it directly certainly fits well with the idea that it is intensely bright, but the nature of its danger could lie in something other than its deadly luminosity.
17. See the theoretically informed yet sensible discussion of this term in Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 52–9; the quotation above comes from 53–4.
18. In all likelihood, many ancient Israelites connected the notion that God’s body or *kabod* is intensely, dangerously, bright with Yhwh’s connection to the sun; some may even have believed that Yhwh’s person was identical with, if not exhausted by, the sun. On this connection, see the discussion in the Appendix, p. 158 and the literature cited there.
19. Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 107; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 201; Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 117.
20. In Psalm 29.1, *kabod* appears alongside the noun ‘oz, which means “praise” or “majesty” in this context, as noted by Radaq and by Dahood, *Psalms, ad loc.*, and see also Weiss, “Four Psalms,” 155 n.12. On the other hand, at the end of the psalm, the same term can be understood as referring to the divine body that sits enthroned above the flood, especially if we accept the emendation proposed by Margulis, “Canaanite,” 334, and Freedman and Hyland, “Psalm 29,” 253.
21. See the references in Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 117 n.2.
22. Even צדק and מישור (Justice and Fairness) may have been hypostatized in Northwest Semitic literature, where they are actual gods; see Ringgren, *Word*, 83–8. (For a similar use in rabbinic liturgy, see the Sabbath morning hymn, “*El Adon*,” where זכות and מישור [Right and Fairness] are in God’s presence, along with other creatures [specifically, חיות הקדש] who comprise the heavenly court.) Consequently, the parallel between *kabod* and terms such as these leaves open at least the possibility that *kabod* here is not an abstract quality but a hypostatized quality that has become a substantial entity.
23. See Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 118.

24. See the classic treatments by von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 37–44, esp. 38–9; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 191–209; Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 48–80. Some scholars object to this line of interpretation. Bernd Janowski argues that

this conception of the cultic presence of Yhwh in his “Name” should not be explained as a reduction or sublimation with regard to the presence of God in the temple, because the context of the centralization formula makes clear in each case “that along with his Name Yhwh Himself can be found at the place” . . . The notion of Yhwh’s dwelling in the temple is nether denied nor attacked by means of the centralization formula. With the formula’s help, rather, God in his Name is proclaimed in full strength as present in the chosen place.

(Janowski, “Ich will,” 175, quoting Weippert, “Ort,” 77–8.) Janowski refers here to the centralization formulas that appear so often in deuteronomistic literature (“the place God will choose to make his *shem* dwell” – לשכן שמו שם, e.g., in Deuteronomy 12.11, 14.23, 16.2; and לשום שמו שם, e.g., in Deuteronomy 12.21, 14.24; 1 Kings 9.3, 11.36). Janowski’s claim that the formula does not specifically preclude the notion that God dwells at Zion alongside His Name seems justified but tells us little. The formula itself is too brief to allow for a clear statement of what it does and does not rule out. To understand the use of the term in D and in Dtr, one needs to examine it in the context of the longer passages in which it appears. These passages go on to speak both about the *shem* and about Yhwh Himself – and, we see later, these passages consistently locate the former on Zion and the latter in heaven. **The insistent contrast between them does in fact rule out the notion that God dwells alongside the Name on earth.** Indeed, the pointed contrast seems intended specifically to rebut that notion. See further n.28.

25. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 35 n.2, points out the source critical significance of this text critical finding. The LXX text, “Book of Song” (βιβλίον δὲ ᾠδῶν), reflects the Hebrew text, ספר השיר, which may be a misspelling of an original text ספר הישר (“The Book of the Upright”), which seems to have been an ancient Israelite collection of poetry from which biblical authors borrowed material; see Joshua 10.13, 2 Samuel 1.18.
26. On the distinction between the chapter’s predeuteronomistic components in verses 10–13 and its deuteronomistic components in 14–66, see Levenson, “From Temple,” 153–4; Brettler, “Interpretation,” 17–18; and Cogan, *1 Kings*, 280–2, 293. Note that 1 Kings 8.12–13 are not the only priestly interpolation in this chapter; for another example, see the discussion of verse 4 in Rofé, “History,” 773. On priestly interpolations in the early section of 1 Kings generally, see especially Haran, *Temples*, 141–2 n.11.
27. On texts of this sort from the Psalter, see Mark Smith, “Seeing God.”
28. Clements, *God and Temple*, 91. The same point is made regarding deuteronomistic literature more generally by G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 70–1. It is precisely the repetitive and insistent assertion of this contrast that undermines the point made by scholars such as Janowski and Weippert (see n.24).
29. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 195. So too Fishbane, *Haftarot*, 143: “Every time the old phrase *makhon le-shivtekhā* appears . . . , implying God’s physical indwelling on the earth, it is supplemented by the phrase ‘in Your heavenly abode,’ whose purpose is to shift the reference to a more transcendental point (1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49).”

30. On Deuteronomy 4–5 as a retelling and hence revisionary commentary on the older documents now found in Exodus 19–20, see Toeg, *Lawgiving*, 57–8 and 52 n.81, and Sommer, “Revelation,” 432–5.
31. The people saw lightning, but God was not in the lightning. They did, on the other hand, hear the voice of God speaking distinct words. See the pointed remarks in 4.12 and 5.23, and my comments on them in Sommer, “Revelation,” 433–4. On the auditory nature of the revelation in Deuteronomy 4–5, see especially Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 30–61. Geller’s treatment deeply influences my discussion here, minor differences notwithstanding.
32. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 39.
33. Maimonides cites Deuteronomy 4.15 and 39, as well as Isaiah 40.18 and 25. See *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Hammadda’*, *Yesodei Hatorah*, 1:8; also his commentary to the Mishnah, Introduction to Sanhedrin Chapter 10 (*Pereq Heleq*), principle 3.
34. See the careful exposition of these verses in Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:230–1 n.11, and his references there to the use of Deuteronomy in philosophical works by Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. Against Maimonides’ reading, see already the historically convincing critique of Maimonides’ contemporary, Abraham of Posquières (in his glosses on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Hammadda’*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3.7), on which see Harvey, “Question,” 69–74.
35. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 208; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 39–40; Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 30–61. Both Weinfeld and Geller are indebted to von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 37–44.
36. As Knohl notes, Deuteronomy’s conception of God is anthropomorphic, but D protects God’s transcendence by placing God in heaven. See Knohl, *Biblical Beliefs*, 128.
37. McBride, “Deuteronomistic,” 178, points out that God places the *shem* at His chosen place in Deuteronomy 12.5, 11, 21; 14.23, 42; 16.2, 6, 11; and 26.2; and in LXX also in 12.26, 14.25, 16.15, 17.8, 10. Several different phrases are used to describe God’s choice of that place (not all of which refer explicitly to the *shem*). The questions of why the phrasing varies, whether the phrase was original to the oldest versions of the Deuteronomistic law codes, and where the *shem* ideology came from are not pertinent to my discussion. On these questions, see the review of literature in McBride, 24–47, and his own rigorous analysis, 178–96; and Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 48–77. Mettinger’s attempts to date the *shem* formulas and to relate their development to political events are disappointingly reductive; see my critique of this approach in Chapters 4 and 5.
38. G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 70.
39. This contrast is noted by Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 198, and Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 48.
40. One verse in Deuteronomy presents an exception to this otherwise consistent conception. In the laws of warfare in Deuteronomy 23.15, we are told that “Yhwh your God moves about in the midst of the camp, saving you and making your enemies submit to you, so that the camp is holy; there should be nothing unseemly among you, which would cause God to leave you.” (A similar conception may lie behind the discussion of warfare in 7.21 and 20.1.) However, as von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 50, already pointed out concerning the laws of war in Deuteronomy,

There is complete agreement today that these laws are not the composition of the author of Deuteronomy, and that fairly old, indeed in part very old, material is present in them . . . All of them presuppose the settlement in Canaan [unlike the fictional setting of Deuteronomy, which consistently claims to be set in the desert before the time of the settlement] – they reckon with cities, siegecraft, alien labourers, and so on.

Thus, this exception to the Deuteronomic theology of God's abode in heaven alone represents a vestige taken into Deuteronomy from older material. That such materials have not been fully reworked to conform to D's ideology in every case is no cause for surprise. To some degree, these laws already show the stamp of D's views, which become evident when we compare these laws to descriptions of war elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (as noted by Rofé, "Laws of Warfare," 150–2), but we should not expect perfectly thoroughgoing revision of older material by the ancient editor. Rofé, too, though differing in crucial respects from von Rad's analysis of what von Rad termed "holy war," also views this verse as belonging to the oldest stratum of the military laws preserved in Deuteronomy, which were written in wisdom circles and later handed down to the deuteronomic scribes; see his discussion in 163–5. Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:282, note priestly affinities of the law in question; they, too, regard the passage as predeuteronomic in origin.

41. See McBride, "Deuteronomic," 187–8.
42. The text found in MT of 1 Chronicles 17.12 may have been the original reading of the LXX of 2 Samuel 7.12 as well. Most manuscripts of the LXX have the oddly redundant reading ἰκοδομήσει μοι οἶκον τῷ ὀνόματί μου, which, McCarter, *2 Samuel*, 194, points out, probably reflects two different readings, one with τῷ ὀνόματί μου but without μοι (matching MT of 2 Samuel 7.13), and one with μοι but without τῷ ὀνόματί μου (matching 1 Chronicles 17.12). In fact, these readings are attested in the LXX manuscript tradition, the former reading in several manuscripts and versions based on LXX, the latter in one medieval manuscript. See Brooke, McLean, and St. John Thackeray, *I and II Samuel*, 128. My thanks to my colleague Dr. Michael Segal of the Hebrew University for clarifying the complexities of the LXX and its daughter translations in this passage.
43. Albertz, *History*, 1:226–7.
44. One possible exception to this rule is Deuteronomy 28.58, which places "the glorious and fearful name of God" in apposition to "Yhwh your God"; each phrase is introduced by its own particle הִנֵּה. The latter phrase, however, is likely a later addition to D's original text; on the use of הִנֵּה to introduce explanatory glosses, see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 48–51. Further, the passage is atypical of D in other ways and may be a later addition; see Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 291, who point to parallels in both priestly literature and the Book of Jeremiah.
45. McBride, "Deuteronomic," 66 and 209–10.
46. El Amarna letter 287, lines 60–1. For the Akkadian, see Knudtzon, *El-Amarna-Tafeln*, 1:866, and for a recent English translation, Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 328, as well as the discussion of the phrase in Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 193 n.3.
47. Cf. McBride, "Deuteronomic," 92, who explains that "establishing a name" on a stele in political contexts means to assert sovereignty over the area where the stele stands, and thus to establish one's royal presence over the area. From there emerges a sense that establishing a name may mean erecting a monument. See also Genesis 11.4, Isaiah 56.5, and 2 Samuel 8.13 (concerning the first two of which note the comments of Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, 83 and references there). McBride also shows (p. 87) that Akkadian uses of terms like *šumam šakānum*, *šumam šitkunum*, *šumam šuzūzum*, and *šumam kunnun* "reveal a desire for the individual to exceed the limitations of his physical selfhood, usually by representing his name in durable form. And, there is good reason to see underlying both [Egyptian and Mesopotamian notions of 'establishing

a name'] the expectation of continuing posthumous benefit through the cult." This begins to seem more concrete than the purely symbolic or verbal use of the phrase, but to my mind, this use is still far from the hypostasis McBride sees in the term in Deuteronomy.

On the Akkadian phrases, see now the comprehensive and clear treatment in Richter, *Deuteronomistic*, 127–99. Richter argues that the Akkadian idiom *šuma šakānu* means not only literally to set up a monument bearing one's name but also to acquire fame and to claim a conquered place as one's own, to assert hegemony or ownership (see 182–4). On the basis of her careful analysis of Akkadian and other ancient Near Eastern texts, Richter makes two claims about the biblical material. First, she claims that the deuteronomists use phrases לַשֵּׁכֶן שְׁמוֹ שָׁמַּיִם and the like in the same way that Akkadian authors use *šuma šakānu*: It simply is a way of asserting Yhwh's ownership over the temple building in Jerusalem (and over the land of Canaan generally), and it has no further theological or metaphysical meaning (207–7). She further claims (and she does not seem to recognize the separate nature of this claim) that the deuteronomists' use of this idiom is not intended to contrast with any earlier Israelite theology. In making the first of these two claims, Richter rejects McBride's notion that God's Name in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic literature is a hypostasis; in making the second, she rejects not only McBride's understanding of Name theology but also that of von Rad, Weinfeld, and Mettinger (as well as my own). Her first claim is plausible, but the second by no means follows from the first. On the contrary, it is likely that D and Dtr deliberately used an idiom borrowed from Akkadian sources (with which as part of a scribal school with roots in the royal court in Jerusalem they were familiar) to deflate a term, שָׁמַיִם, which carries metaphysical and theological connotations elsewhere. An implication of Richter's view is that the deuteronomists did not view the temple as the residence of any sort of divine presence, hypostasized or otherwise. That implication in fact works well with the theses of, say, von Rad and Weinfeld, because it supports the theme of divine transcendence that is crucial to deuteronomic Name theology.

Richter also objects to the work of McBride, von Rad, Weinfeld, and Mettinger on the grounds that these scholars base themselves, however unwittingly, on an evolutionary scheme that was applied to Israelite religious history by Julius Wellhausen (see 22–36). This objection does not carry weight, for two reasons. First, it is not necessarily accurate. The various forms of theology these scholars find in biblical texts, some stressing immanence (the theology proclaiming "God is in Zion" in Psalms or first Isaiah; priestly theology), some stressing transcendence (deuteronomic theology), need not have succeeded each other in the manner Wellhausen (or Hegel) assumes to have been the case; indeed, according to both Weinfeld and Mettinger, the priestly and deuteronomic theologies coexisted. Similarly, my own discussion of these theologies is not wed to any particular dating of the texts concerned and allows us to presume that they overlapped for centuries. Second, even if some of these scholars' work presumes some evolutionary scheme that happens to match Wellhausen's, that is hardly a proof that their work is wrong or even suspect. For all his flaws, Wellhausen was one of the greatest biblical scholars of the past two millennia, and he did manage to get some things right.

48. Eliade, *Patterns*, 229–31, suggests that a priestly elite regarded the betyl at Bethel not as an embodiment but a symbol. If he is correct, then the "elite" view of the betyl was a predecessor to the outright rejection of betyls we find in D and (as we see later) in P.

49. Ginsberg, *Israelian*, 37, 115–16, notes that the rejection of the *'asherah* is especially characteristic of Deuteronomy.
50. Albertz, *History*, 1:216.
51. For a brilliant discussion of Deuteronomy as introducing the notion of God as a unified personality, see Geller, “God of the Covenant,” 273–319, esp. 280–302.
52. The translation and theological meaning of Deuteronomy 6.4, the opening verse of the *Shema*, are famously difficult. The multitudinous secondary literature treating this verse is often confusing and at times confused. For a clear and well thought-out summary of the question at hand, see McBride, “Yoke,” 292:

On the grammatical level, the problem is two-fold: first, whether the first four words [ה' אלהינו ה' אחד] should be read as one or two nominal clauses, and, in either case, which elements function as subject and which as predicate; second, the precise semantic force and syntactical function of the final element, *'ehad*. On a theological level the question is whether we have a declaration of Yhwh's “oneness,” the indivisibility of his person into semi-autonomous attributes, local manifestations and the like, or a declaration that Israel is to serve Yhwh exclusively, however many “gods” there may be vying for the nation's attention. An acceptable reading of the statement must satisfy *both* the criterion of appropriate Hebrew grammar and that of appropriate meaning in the context of Deuteronomic theology.

Although there are many possible understandings of the verse, they fall into two main categories: those that regard the verse as focusing on the requirement that Israel worship only one God (e.g., “Yhwh is our God, Yhwh alone!”) and those that regard the verse as focusing on the indivisible nature of Yhwh (e.g., “Yhwh our God is one Yhwh,” or “Yhwh our God – Yhwh is one”). Translations from the former category, which make a point about the importance of monolatry, exemplify what might be termed the “Yhwh alone” reading. Translations from the latter category, which make a point about the nature of God, exemplify the “one Yhwh” reading. (When read in the context of the current Book of Deuteronomy, which is, to say, shortly after the statement that Yhwh is the only deity in Deuteronomy 4.35, the former understanding can even be termed monotheistic. Many biblical scholars believe that an earlier edition of Deuteronomy did not include Chapter 4, in which case 6.4 would originally have been monolatrous but not clearly monotheistic, as noted by Braulik, “Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt,” 119.)

Various scholars have argued on behalf of the “Yhwh alone” reading and against the “one Yhwh” reading, which they regard as an incorrect reading (e.g., Rashbam; ibn Ezra; S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 89–90; Braulik, “Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt,” 119–22). Against these scholars, we may note the following:

- If a simply monotheistic or monolatrous point were being made, the verse might have used phrasing resembling 1 Kings 18.39 (ה' הוא האלהים), 1 Kings 8.60 (ה' הוא האלהים אין עוד), or Deuteronomy 4.35 (ה' הוא האלהים אין עוד מלבדו), or it might have simply read something like ה' אלהינו ה' לבדו. The decision of the author of this passage *not* to use the sort of phrasing found in 1 Kings 18.39, 1 Kings 8.60, Deuteronomy 4.35, or 2 Kings 19.15 is revealing. The point the phrasing in this particular verse is making is not only about the exclusive loyalty Israel owes the one true deity, but about the nature of that deity, whose self is unified, not fluid. (Against this claim, one might argue that לבדו is an adverb, and hence it could not have been used in a nominal sentence such as we have in Deuteronomy 6.4; for the view that לבדו is an adverb, see Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, 2:270; McBride, “Yoke,” 293 n.45; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 337–8. But the use of

אֶחָד as a predicate adjective rather than as an adverb does in fact occur in nominal sentences in 2 Kings 19.15, in 2 Kings 19.19, and in Psalm 86.10. It follows that אֶחָד here is, at the least, a very unusual word for making the “Yhwh alone” point. It is more likely that the authors chose it to make the “one Yhwh” point. On this line of reasoning, see also Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 531 n.2.)

- The “One Yhwh” reading understands the subject of the sentence to be “Yhwh” rather than “God.” Although it is possible that (as McBride, “Yoke,” 292–3, 297, argues cogently) “our God” can be the subject (i.e., that the predicate comes first in the sentence and is followed by the subject), the other reading is also possible and is in fact more normal. Kautzsch, *GKC*, 141§l–n, shows that in ancient Hebrew noun clauses (in contrast to verbal clauses), the normal order is subject followed by predicate, even though the opposite order occurs as well, especially when the clause emphasizes the predicate. In Deuteronomy 6.4, the predicate repeats the substantive that serves as subject (to wit, “Yhwh”). This is entirely normal in the ancient Hebrew noun sentence; see *GKC* §141d. Hence the “one Yhwh” reading is at least as linguistically possible as the “Yhwh alone” reading.
- McBride, “Yoke,” 294, contests the “One Yhwh” reading, arguing (a) that the larger context of Deuteronomy is not concerned with the possibility that Yhwh might fragment into localized manifestations and (b) that it is concerned rather with the requirement that Israelites should worship Yhwh alone. The second claim is valid, but the first does not stand up to scrutiny. Deuteronomy’s insistence that sacrifices can be offered to Yhwh only in the single place Yhwh chooses demonstrates that Yhwh’s fragmentation and localization were indeed central concerns of Deuteronomy’s authors. Further, the two concerns – exclusivity of worship and unity of Yhwh’s self – are intimately related: The deuteronomists were concerned that allowing for localized cults of Yhwh could lead to worship of many gods, because a localized Yhwh might evolve into an independent deity or might merge with or be confused with a baal deity.
- A different line of reasoning appears in McCarter, “Aspects,” 142. McCarter argues against the “one Yhwh” position, pointing out that the immediate context of Deuteronomy 6.4 focuses not on the possibility of local manifestations of Yhwh but, as verses 14–15 make clear, on the need for exclusive loyalty to Yhwh. (So also Geller, “God of the Covenant,” 290–1.) But these two functions of Deuteronomy 6.4 are not mutually exclusive. McCarter is right to emphasize the immediate context of the verse; at the same time, one of the central concerns of its wider context in deuteronomistic literature supports the reading I endorse here.

All this is not to claim that it is absolutely impossible that Deuteronomy 6.4 could be understood to mean “Yhwh is our God, Yhwh alone.” Both readings are grammatically legitimate, and context lends supports to both readings. More specifically, the local context in Deuteronomy 4–6 supports the “Yhwh alone” reading, and the wider context in Deuteronomy supports the “Yhwh is one” reading. The ambiguity of the verse may well be intentional. Deuteronomistic literature directs its audience to reread and contemplate the text of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 6.6, 11.19, 17.18–19, 31.19–23; Joshua 1.8), and the reader who does so will recognize that more than one meaning has been encoded into this short but rich verse. On the intentional ambiguity of the clause, see the astute comment of Rofé, “Summary,” 9.

For the reading of Deuteronomy 6.4 suggested here, see further Bade, “Monoyhwh-wismus”; Höffken, “Bemerkung.” This reading is also accepted by Donner, “Hier sind,”

50. For a discussion of the linguistic issues and their bearing on issues of selfhood, see especially Geller, “God of the Covenant,” 290–302.
53. See the similar conclusion of Rofé, “Summary,” 9; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:226 and 2:188; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:227.
54. Zechariah 14.9 makes the same point explicitly: “On that day, Yhwh will be one and His *shem* will be one.”
55. Concerning the extraordinary parallel between the uses of Torah texts in Israel and of divine images elsewhere in the ancient Near East, see van der Toorn, “Iconic Book.” Similarly, the ark, which for Deuteronomic tradition is nothing more than the repository of the original text of the Ten Commandments, functions in a manner similar to divine statues in Mesopotamia. Thus, for example, the deuteronomic narrative of the capture of the ark by Israel’s enemies and its subsequent return closely parallels Mesopotamian stories of the capture of the divine *šalmu* and its subsequent return, concerning which see Miller and Roberts, *Hand*, 9–17.
56. On *kabod* as God’s body, see especially Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 141–53, and Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 113–20. On *kabod* as simply equivalent to God, see Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 107, and Aster, “Phenomenon,” 353–4. These scholars present a position at odds with, and more convincing than, those of Clements, *God and Temple*, 104; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:32; and von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:234–41. Against Eichrodt’s overly rationalist approach, see especially Barr, “Theophany,” 34. The term *kabod* occasionally refers to God’s anthropomorphic form in rabbinic literature as well. See Fishbane, “Measures,” 62–3.
57. Aster, “Phenomenon,” 346–427, argues at length that *kabod* in the Pentateuch does not refer to a luminous object and that this sense of the term is limited to Ezekiel, who explicitly describes its brightness (Ezekiel 1.27–8, 8.1–2). His arguments are not convincing. Although he is correct that only Ezekiel pauses to describe its brightness, the use of the term in P and its use in Ezekiel are so closely related, as I go on to explain in the body of this chapter, that one can presume that they refer to a single perception of God. Moreover, in P, the *kabod* is often associated with the cloud that surrounds it, and in some texts with fire. (See Exodus 24.17 and 40.38; see also Leviticus 10.2, according to which “Yhwh” is located in the tabernacle. It is clear that Yhwh is identical with the *kabod* that calls out to Moses from within the tabernacle in the continuous narrative we have in Exodus 40.34–Leviticus 1.1). The fire points toward the bright nature of the *kabod*, and the cloud hints at its intense luminosity, because the cloud is needed to cloak the deadly brightness. That Ezekiel pauses to spell out this aspect of the *kabod* while P simply assumes it is not surprising; Ezekiel is unique among biblical authors in his extraordinarily detailed, indeed baroque, descriptions of the epiphenomena of divine presence.
58. So Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 115, and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 203; Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 89. A somewhat different picture is suggested by Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 588–90, who argues that the *kabod* may have been located atop the tabernacle, where it was generally hidden from sight by the cloud, becoming brighter at times of crisis so that it was visible to all the people through the cloud. David Frankel argues that older priestly traditions located the *kabod* within the sanctuary, where it was not visible to the people; thus, the holy of holies was Yhwh’s throne room. Later priestly documents, he argues, locate the *kabod* above the tabernacle, where it was visible to the whole nation; thus, for the later priestly traditions, the tabernacle was a throne, not a throne room. See Frankel, “Two Priestly.” His reading is intriguing, but it seems based

on a questionable conflation of the *kabod* and the cloud (see especially his remarks on p. 32), against which see Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 142–4; Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 166–7; and Mettinger, 89.

59. See Propp, “Skin.”
60. On the dynamic between explicit description and these verbal reservations in Ezekiel 1, see especially the discussion in Savran, *Encountering*, 54–60.
61. On the connection between P’s conception in these verses and Ezekiel 1.26, see also von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:146.
62. The term *’adam* as used by P refers not just to a single character and certainly not just to a male (as it does in the J account of creation in Genesis 2–3), but first of all to a collective. This is evident in the plural verb, וַיִּרְדּוּ, applied to the noun in Genesis 1.26. It is further evident in P’s phrasing in Genesis 5.3: וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים בְּרֵאשִׁית וַיִּבְרָךְ אֹתָם וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָם: אָדָם בַּיּוֹם הַבְּרֵאשִׁית (“Male and female He created them, and He blessed them and called their name ‘humanity’ [*adam*] on the day they were created”). The female and the male are distinct individuals, as the use of the plural accusatives and the plural genitive makes clear, and both are called *adam*. In this verse, then (and in 1.26–7, which use the same phrasing), the term *adam* refers to the species, not only to a male individual. To be sure, P also uses the term *adam*, like J, to refer to the first human male in 5.3–5 (though nowhere else). This dual meaning of the term lies behind the odd move between the third-person singular accusative (אִיִּתּוֹ) and the third-person plural accusative (אֹתָם) in 1.27 and 5.2–3.
63. Some scholars detect a complex compositional history behind these repetitive lines; for references, see the comprehensive review of literature in Bird, “Male and Female,” 143–4 n.51. In fact, there is no reason to suspect that the text is composite or has undergone any revision or addition. These verses use repetitive structures that are rhythmic, stately, and emphatic, thereby moving away from prose narration toward the sort of heightened language typical of biblical poetry, though the parallelism in these verses is not as regular as that found in, say, a psalm. In this regard Genesis 1.26–7 are hardly unique; when P’s narration reaches a momentous juncture, P tends to move from prosaic and syntagmatic language to poetic and paradigmatic phrasing. This technique slows down the narration, encouraging the listener to dwell on an important point in the story. For other examples, see Genesis 1.3, 2.1–4, 7.11, 8.1–3, 9.6–7; Exodus 40.33b–35. On the poetic nature of these verses, see also Cassuto, *Genesis*, *ad loc.* On the tendency of priestly texts, both narrative and legal, to move from prose to poetry and back to prose in a single passage, see Paran, *Forms*, 98–136. Here it is crucial to recall that prose and poetry in ancient Hebrew were not strictly distinguished and that a middle ground existed in which poetic features, such as parallelism and rhythm, appeared but did not occur with regularity. See Kugel, *Idea*, 59–95, esp. 85–7, 94–5. The priestly creation account provides a fine example of this middle ground, moving at times further along this continuum toward the realm of heightened language that we usually term poetry in the Bible, and moving at other times further from it, never quite exemplifying pure poetry but always constituting something other than regular prose. (Parts of the priestly flood story provide another, less pronounced example.) In short, with regard to Genesis 1.26–7 (as also in regard to so many passages), attention to literary form would have precluded a depressingly common and facile compositional analysis.
64. On members of the divine court (sometimes called “angels”) as the addressees here, see especially Gunkel, *Genesis*, 112–13; Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 115–16, 125–6; Garr, *Image*, 18–21, 72–92, and 201–2. The objections to this view brought up in Westermann,

Genesis 1–11, 144–5, were anticipated and countered in Weinfeld’s footnote 66 on p. 116. For the idea that *Genesis 1.26* refers to the ministering angels, see also traditional commentaries (Rashi, Seforno) and midrashic texts and Targum (e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 8:3, 8:5, *Targum Jonathan ad. loc.*, etc.). For a discussion of the relation between Yhwh and these other heavenly beings in the Hebrew Bible, see the Appendix pp. 146–7 and 160–73.

65. See Joüon and Muraoka, *JM*, §114e n.1.

66. Garr, *Image*, 53–4.

67. See further n.92 in the Appendix.

68. From among the many discussions of the term in biblical scholarship, see especially the very helpful discussions in Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 112–16 (whose influence on my work in this chapter is immense), and Garr, *Image*, 5–6 and 117–76. For a briefer treatment, see Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 199–201. The fundamental studies that brought biblical scholarship to this conclusion are Nöldeke, “צלמות und צלם” (see especially his forceful argument on 186) and Gunkel, *Genesis*, 113–14. For a review of biblical scholarship on the issue, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 147–55; Bird, “Male and Female,” 123–6 (who notes the unhappy lack of communication between biblical and theological scholarship on the issue); and for the most comprehensive discussion and recent references, Garr, *passim*. For a brief overview of some main contours of thought on this question among Christian theologians, see Barr, *Biblical Faith*, 157–9. A brief and especially sensitive discussion of the issue, though not of the secondary literature, appears in Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 17–19. For the rare case of a modern Jewish theologian who defends this reading and explores its implications, see Wyschogrod, “Incarnation,” 165–78; on *Genesis 1.26–7*, see especially his remarks on 171, and see further Wyschogrod, *Body*.

The conclusion that *šelem* in *Genesis 1.26–7* refer to a physical shape, and hence to a body, is not limited to modern biblical scholars. Alon Goshen-Gottstein points out that classical rabbinic texts (as opposed to medieval Jewish exegetes) almost unanimously understand the *šelem* in *Genesis 1.26–7* as God’s body; see Goshen-Gottstein, “Body,” 173–6. For additional evidence, see Lorberbaum, *Image*, 14–23, 89–101, 278–335. Note further that some rabbinic texts see the word *demut* as interchangeable with *kabod* or *temunah*; see *Exodus Rabbah* 23:15 and *Sifre Zuṭa* to Numbers 12:8, and the discussion in Wolfson, *Speculum*, 47–9.

69. One might object to my assertion that these words in *Genesis 1.26–7* refer to visible, concrete representations of concrete objects by noting that at times *כדמות* can function essentially as a preposition meaning “like” – e.g., in *Isaiah 13.4*. In such as case, *דמות* loses its physical denotation. Nevertheless, the combination of the two words in *Genesis 1.26–7* in all likelihood is intended to stress the concrete sense of the more ambiguous *דמות*. In making this claim, I disagree with Garr, who argues that “the two terms are different. In combination or separately, each nominal phrase expresses and implies a very different characterization of the human race” (Garr, *Image*, 166). In fact, these terms have a substantial area of overlap: Both can refer to physical representations of a physical object. The noun *צלם* on its own may refer to a representation that, on a visual level, does not closely resemble what it represents, and the term *דמות* may refer to a likeness without as strongly implying the substance of the representation or of what is represented; however, both terms often include both physicality and similarity within their semantic fields. By using both terms (both in *Genesis 1.26–7* as well as in 5.3), the priestly authors strongly suggest that they intend a meaning located in the substantial

overlap of the two semantic fields. Hence the verse graphically points to a conception of God, angels, and humans as physical beings whose physical forms resemble each other.

It has also been suggested on the basis of Psalm 39.7 and Psalm 73.20 that צלם can have a nonconcrete or abstract meaning; see, e.g., Garr, 124. This suggestion, however, is specious. In both psalms, the word צלם is in all likelihood a word unrelated to the more common צלם in Hebrew. This less common word means “shadow, dim apparition” and goes back to the proto-Semitic root *ʕlm*. That root (= צלם_{II} in Hebrew) is cognate with Arabic *ṣalama* and the Ugaritic *ṣlmt* and *glmt* as well as the root known in the common Akkadian phrase *ṣalmat qaqqadi*. It seems to mean “darkness, obscurity.” The more common Hebrew noun (צלם_I), meaning “image, physical representation,” goes back to the proto-Semitic *šlm* (cognate to the Arabic *ṣalama*), which apparently meant “chop off, hew.” See HALOT, on the roots צלם_I and צלם_{II}. The noun from the root צלם_{II} is much less common in biblical Hebrew. It occurs only in Psalm 39.7 (which is to be rendered, “Indeed, man goes about in obscurity; he mutters sounds devoid of meaning; he collects things without knowing who gathers them”) and perhaps in Psalm 73.20 (where, however, the term may in fact retain its basic meaning of model or form; both possible meanings fit the context). The less common noun does not make sense in Genesis 1.26–7.

70. Gruber, “Image.”
71. On the importance of this point, see Loewenstamm, “Man as Image,” and Gruber, “Image,” 81–7. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 436–68, argues similarly that the human body replaces the temple in rabbinic literature, and he explores the halachic and ethical implications of this (mainly Akiban) view with great sensitivity.
72. See the helpful review in Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 148–55. Christian interpreters, under the influence of Platonism, began relatively early to develop a notion of an incorporeal God and hence read the verses as metaphorical or figural; see the helpful summary and review of literature in Stroumsa, “Form(s),” 270 (and especially notes 3–6). Jewish interpreters other than Philo moved in this direction only much later, starting especially with the philosophical work of Saadia.
73. On sovereignty as the result of humanity’s sharing God’s form, note the phrasing in Genesis 1.26: “Let us make humanity in our form, after our shape *so that* they may rule . . .” As is often the case, the *waw* with a *shewa* in וַיַּעַשׂ, coming as it does after the modal form וַיַּעֲשֶׂה, indicates purpose; hence my translation, “so that they will rule . . .” On this usage, see BDB 254a; JM §116d–e; and especially the comprehensive discussion in Fassberg, *Studies*, 76–82.
74. On this interpretation and its history going back to Saadia, see the helpful review in Levenson, *Creation*, 112–16. Further, Loewenstamm, “Man as Image,” 1–2, points out that in Assyrian texts it is specifically the king who is the image (*ṣalmu*) of a god. P picks up a motif relating to royalty and hence political sovereignty and applies it to all humanity in these verses. For additional Akkadian texts that equate the king (and in one case, an exorcist-priest) with the divine image, see Gruber, “Image,” 84.
75. On the importance of Genesis 5.1–3 for ascertaining the anthropomorphic sense of the nouns in question, see also Gunkel, *Genesis*, 113–14, who similarly underscores the physical nature of these nouns in P.
76. Phyllis Bird would disagree with this assertion. She argues that the issue concerning the image is totally separate from the question of gender. In “Male and Female,” 149, Bird concludes that “the meaning and function of the statement, ‘male and female

he created them,' is considerably more limited than is commonly assumed. It says nothing about the image which relates *adam* to God nor about God as the referent of the image." The reference to gender is present in Genesis 1.27b, Bird maintains, only because P emphasizes procreation when describing the creation of humanity, just as P emphasizes procreation in other parts of Genesis 1, and the issue of procreation through a species that has both males and females needs special attention once God's asexual and nonreproductive image has been introduced in 1.26–27a. In her reading, the last verset or poetic member of 1.28 ("male and female He created them") belongs to a totally different thematic moment from the first two versets of that verse ("Let us make . . ." and "so that they rule"); the first two versets deal with the divine image in humanity, the third with the unrelated issue of humanity's ability to procreate. For this reason, Bird must contend that the parallelism of 1.27 "is progressive, not synonymous. The second statement adds to this first; it does not explicate it" (144) – in other words, there really is no parallelism at the level of meaning. Bird's reading, then, requires the assumption that the final verset of the three-part parallel line in verse 27 addresses something completely different from its first two versets. This argument strikes me as strained. Given the norms of biblical parallelism, it is much more likely that the parallelism in 1.28 is in fact explicative. Explicative parallelism is quite typical of biblical poetic lines, and there is no reason to deny that possibility here, whereas progressive or synthetic parallelism is much less common. Reading the parallelism as explicative is preferable if only because one should in the first instance attempt to read a poetic line in an integrated way. In short, the three-part line in Genesis 1.27 speaks of both humanity's divine image and humanity's gendered nature. One cannot avoid the conclusion that for the author of this line the two issues are tightly interwoven. On the unhappy attempt of some critics to find multiple authors in this poetic line, see n.63 in this chapter.

77. Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 113, asserts that the *kabod* has a human form only in Ezekiel and not in the P document. It is clear, however, that P's God has a human shape, to which P refers in Genesis 1 with the term *šelem*. Further, as I argue in the paragraph that follows in the main text, it is clear that priestly literature uses the word *kabod* to refer to God's body. It follows, then, that the *šelem* of the *kabod* (that is, the form of the divine body) is roughly humanoid in shape, even though for P the thick cloud that surrounds it prevents humans from seeing it.
78. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:226–7.
79. On this insistent and valid claim of Kaufmann's, see also 1:229 and 231.
80. Kaufmann does state, rather vaguely, that "the depictions of God in JE narratives are more concrete" than in P (1:227), but he does not quite admit that God has a material body (and not just a shape) in those texts, especially in J.
81. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 88.
82. On the enormous size of deities in the ancient Near East, including the Bible, see especially Greenfield, "Baal's Throne," 894–7, and Mark Smith, "Divine Form"; note also the evidence of the three-foot long footprints at the 'Ain Dara temple in Syria, on which see Monson, "New," 26–8 (who points out that the god who was imagined to have made the footprints would have been about 65 feet tall). On the dimensions of God in early Jewish mystical literature, see Cohen, *Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy*, 99–109. It is possible that the unimaginably large size imputed to the divine body in the *shi'ur qomah* texts

represents an attempt to discourage an overly literal type of anthropomorphic vision; see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 164, and Dan, “Concept.”

83. For this line of reasoning, see, e.g., Clements, *God and Temple*, 104, who maintains that Ezekiel “never suggests that it is Yhwh himself that he has actually seen, but only his glory,” and Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:30–4, who acknowledges that some Israelites might have made this identification but argues that such a person would have been a “simple man of the people” rather than one of the educated elite (30–1). See also Mark Smith, *Origins*, 272, who argues that Ezekiel 1 “deliberately attempts to stress the transcendent character of Yhwh by reducing the anthropomorphic presentation of Yhwh in the heavenly divine council.” Smith seems to conflate the stress on transcendence with a move away from anthropomorphism. Even if it is correct to see Ezekiel 1 as stressing divine transcendence (a claim that must confront the fact that Ezekiel 1 portrays the irruption of the divine into the world and thus represents a blending of immanent and transcendent perspectives), the extraordinarily anthropomorphic nature of this and other texts in Ezekiel remains quite clear: The prophet states explicitly, if hesitantly, that the *kabod* has a form like that of a human being (Ezekiel 1.26–8).

Against this line of reasoning as found in Clements, Eichrodt, and Smith, see Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 201–2, who points out that in earlier biblical texts “the cloud and fire are only the attendant signs of God’s terrifying and overwhelming power (Exod. 19:16–18; Ps. 97:2–3, etc.), not component parts of the divine manifestation, nor indispensable features of the divine apparition In Priestly and Ezekielian literature, on the other hand, the fire and cloud are inseparable elements of the apparition of God’s Glory.”

84. See Urbach, *Sages*, 40–1.
85. Maimonides, *Guide*, I:64 (pp. 156–7); cf. also his statement while discussing Ezekiel 1.28 in III:7 (p. 430) that “*the glory of the Lord is not the Lord*” but rather a created thing. On the created nature of any spatial attribute or perception of God, see also I:25 (p. 55).
86. On these distinctions, see, especially Idel, *Kabbalah*, 136–53, as well as Scholem, *Major Trends*, 65–6, 269–73, and Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 15–55 and 251–73. A philosophically informed discussion of these two approaches to the *sephirot* can be found in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 197–201.
87. On the identity of the creatures (חיות) of [chapter 1](#) and the cherubs (כרובים) of [chapter 10](#), see Haran, *Temples*, 250 n.4.
88. On the identity of the *kabod* and God throughout the Book of Ezekiel, see especially Rimón Kasher, “Anthropomorphism,” 359–61. Kasher suggests later in that article that Ezekiel’s anthropomorphic rhetoric in fact constitutes a response to the primitive notions of his audience; in other words, Kasher maintains that Ezekiel doesn’t really believe in his own rhetoric. Yet Kasher himself demonstrates the thoroughgoing (one might even say aggressive) nature of the prophet’s anthropomorphism and the consistency with which the prophet follows up on its implications. In light of this consistency, Kasher’s rather Maimonidean suggestion that Ezekiel didn’t really mean it seems highly unlikely.
89. My analysis here is deeply indebted to Schwartz, “Priestly Account,” 103–34, esp. 125. On the identification of priestly material in the Sinai pericope, see Schwartz, “What Really”; and Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:109–43.

90. I leave out Exodus 24.18b, which is from E and introduces an interruption between the two halves of P's sentence. See Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:119; S.R. Driver, *Exodus*, 256; and Schwartz, "What Really," 26.
91. It is important to recall that Exodus 39–Leviticus 10 constitute a single narrative. Leviticus 1.1 narrates the event that followed the one narrated in the last verse of Exodus. As Schwartz, "Priestly Account," shows with particular success, there is no gap or delay in narrative time between the last verse of Exodus and the first verse of Leviticus (see further Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 139). It is for this reason that we find a *waw*-consecutive verb at the beginning of Leviticus rather than one of constructions that begin a new narrative (e.g., וַיִּי followed by a temporal phrase or *waw*+noun+affix verb).
92. See Haran, *Temples*, 246–59, and de Vaux, "Ark," 147–8, who notes the placement of treaty or divinely inscribed documents under a god's feet elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature; this usage corresponds to the ark's use as container for the tablets and footstool. Significantly, this use of the ark is eschewed by Deuteronomy, for which of course God never came down to earth at all. In Deuteronomy, the ark is exclusively intended as a receptacle for the tablets, and its role as footstool is never mentioned. See von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:238; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 208. On the motif of cherubs as thrones in ancient Israel and among the Phoenicians, see the review of textual and artifactual evidence in Mettinger, "Yhwh."
93. Contra, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:32, and von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:237–9. Von Rad maintains that P's God is not constantly present in the tabernacle, but arrives there at certain times to meet with Israel. Von Rad's reasoning is deeply flawed, because none of the verses he cites in this connection (1:239 n.117) in fact support his view. Especially revealing is the statement of von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, 39 n.2, that P "gives several accounts of this wonderful way in which Yhwh kept coming down" to appear at the tent of meeting. In fact, not a single one of the verses to which von Rad refers (Exodus 16.10, 29.43; Numbers 14.10, 16.19, 17.7, and 20.6) describe Yhwh or the *kabod* as descending from heaven – in marked contrast to E, which does describe God as coming down to the tent (Exodus 33.9; Numbers 11.17, 11.25, and 12.5). This consistent contrast argues persuasively against von Rad: P does not regard the tent as a place to which Yhwh occasionally descended but as a place where Yhwh lived. See further the critiques of von Rad's view in McBride, "Deuteronomistic," 30; Blum, *Studien*, 298–9; Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 130; and Joosten, *People and Land*, 143–4.

Similarly, Cross argues that P uses the verb שָׁכַן to refer to the *kabod*'s presence because this verb refers to an impermanent sort of dwelling, in contrast to יָשַׁב, which refers to a more permanent dwelling; see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 245, 298–9, and also Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, 158. This assertion, which has become very influential in contemporary biblical scholarship, especially in the United States, demands further attention.

A thorough examination of the contexts in which the verbs שָׁכַן and יָשַׁב occur simply does not support the assertions that שָׁכַן connotes temporary or episodic presence whereas יָשַׁב connotes ongoing and uninterrupted residence. T. N. D. Mettinger has already shown that יָשַׁב when used of Yhwh has no implications regarding length of

dwelling but simply implies enthronement (see Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 90–4). Moreover, שָׁכַן does clearly refer to permanent dwelling in several cases. For example, Rimón Kasher, “Anthropomorphism,” 362, points out that Ezekiel 43.7 reads שָׁכַן לְעוֹלָם (“dwell forever”), leaving no doubt that this verb can refer to permanent dwelling. Further, Kasher points out that the gate through which God entered is closed forever (44.1–2) to convey the message that Yhwh will never again leave the temple. To Kasher’s point, we can add that שָׁכַן appears with words indicating eternity (usually לְעוֹלָם) in several other cases: 1 Chronicles 23.25; Psalm 37.27; Isaiah 34.17 (with לְדוֹר דּוֹר); Jeremiah 7.7; 1 Kings 6.13 (וּשְׁכַנְתִּי . . . וְלֹא אֶעֱזֹב). These many cases make clear that Cross’s suggestion is off the mark; שָׁכַן cannot be limited to the meaning “dwell temporarily,” because otherwise so many writers would not use לְעוֹלָם and לְדוֹר דּוֹר to modify it. One such case might have been a play on words or a deliberate misuse by a quirky poet, but so many such cases would be unlikely had the verb denoted impermanence.

The evidence from P itself fails to support the assertion that a particular meaning has been attributed to the verb. P never portrays the *kabod* as leaving and again arriving. Sarna’s contention that “the Tabernacle is only the material, numinous symbol of God’s immanence, of His Presence being felt in the community of Israel with particular intensification” (206) is of particular interest. Here, Sarna (like Rashi on Exodus 25.8) imports into P the attitude of D. Through this harmonization, Sarna attributes to P precisely the opposite of what P takes pains to assert. Similarly, Milgrom, *Numbers*, 374–5, maintains that the presence of God in the priestly tabernacle is to be understood as temporary, unpredictable, or symbolic. Against Milgrom’s reasoning, see the detailed critique in Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 165–7.

Finally, as Marc Brettler points out to me, had the priests intended to describe God’s residence as necessarily temporary, they could have used a Hebrew verb that has just that meaning: נָגַד. But they did not.

94. By the standard biblical reckoning, a total of 480 years elapsed from Moses’ day to Solomon’s, and another 430 from Solomon’s to the destruction of the temple. On these clearly typological numbers, see, e.g., Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 8–9.
95. It is in this respect that the priestly theology, especially as articulated by Ezekiel, differs from what Mettinger calls the “Zion-Sabbat” theology (Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 15–36, 81–113). For the latter, the divine presence was permanently enthroned in the Jerusalem temple, whereas for the former its presence was not eternally guaranteed. (On God’s unceasing and protecting presence in Jerusalem in various texts outside priestly literature, see especially Hayes, “Tradition of Zion’s,” and Ollenberger, *Zion*.) Otherwise, the two conceptions are remarkably similar. On this debate, see further Kutsko, *Between*, 83–7. Mettinger rather overstates the difference between the two biblical positions, in large part because he insists on reading the priestly theology as the product of the exilic or postexilic period. If one does not accept Mettinger’s dating of P, or if one does not agree that the historical setting of a document must dictate its meaning, Mettinger’s distinction between monarchical and priestly understandings of divine presence falls apart.
96. My reading here differs from the classic study by Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 149–51, who maintains that the *kabod* dwelt at Sinai prior to the Israelites’ arrival there. But it is clear from the *waw*-consecutive verbs in Exodus 24.15–16 that first the cloud arrived and covered the mountain, and only thereafter did the *kabod* come to dwell

- there; had the *kabod* been dwelling there already, a past-perfect form would have been used at the beginning of verse 16 (וכבוד ה' שכן על הר סיני), when in fact we have the normal consecutive past (ויעל משה . . . ויכס הענן את ההר ושכן כבוד ה' על הר סיני); the text then informs us that the cloud remained there for six days, after which the *kabod*/Yhwh called out to Moses.
97. For a similar reading of the Pentateuch's P document, see the theologically sensitive treatment in Blum, *Studien*, 287–332.
 98. It is significant that the Hebrew term for tabernacle (literally “dwelling place”), *משכן*, is cognate to the Akkadian term *sikkānu*, a type of dwelling place of a deity discussed in [Chapter 1](#) (p. 29, and cf. pp. 49–50). On the seemingly odd interchange of Akkadian *s* at Mari with Hebrew *š*, see Fleming, “Mari’s Large,” 487, especially n.12, and see further the important clarification on 491 n.24.
 99. Scholars have debated whether the priestly documents in the Pentateuch endorse or assume the sort of cult centralization known from Deuteronomy. Most scholars believe that P does so, but a few (in particular, Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:126–37) argue the opposite. Concerning this question, see my remarks in [Chapter 4](#) nn.7 and 51. In all likelihood, the earliest PT traditions did not originally relate to the Jerusalem temple (or at least they did not relate exclusively to the Jerusalem temple), nor did they command cult centralization. But the latest strata of P (to wit, HS), were certainly composed with the Jerusalem temple in mind (probably contemporaneously with or after the rise of the deuteronomic school in Josian times); see Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 112–13, 204, and Yohanan Aharoni, “Solomonic,” 8. The final form of the P document and the Book of Ezekiel do assume that only one temple should exist, even though vestiges of older views endure here and there in the text (viz., in Leviticus 26.31, concerning which see Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:133, as well as Joosten, *People and Land*, 127 n.125, who nevertheless acknowledges that the stand of H as a whole on this point is unclear, 142 n.27; and perhaps Numbers 5.3). Consequently, the discussions of *kabod* in P and Ezekiel can be read in a one-temple context, and P’s tabernacle can legitimately be regarded as a cipher for the Jerusalem temple, even though the earliest priestly texts did not intend it that way. A condemnation of multiple sanctuaries, each with its own presentation of the divine body, probably lies behind Numbers 33.50–6. This passage is to be attributed to HS; see Haran, *Temples*, 20 n.11 and 145 n.16.
 100. The notion that God is present in the temple does not preclude God from acting elsewhere. Clements, *God and Temple*, 67, points out that “far from conveying the belief that Yhwh was an earth-bound God, tied to his abode in Jerusalem, the whole outlook and purpose of the temple was to stress his creative and universal action.”
 101. The rejection of stela in priestly literature is also evinced in Ezekiel 26.11, which specifically condemns the famous dual stela of Tyre. Concerning these two stela see Mettinger, *No Graven*, 95–8.
 102. The connection of the bush and the menorah is clearly evident to the eye in Hareuveni, *Emblem*, 11–13. On this connection, see further Meyers, *Tabernacle Menorah*, 180–1; on the connection of tree/bush, menorah, and fire, see 144–8 and 176–7, and note also her comments on the connection with Asherah, see viii–ix.
 103. As Baruch Schwartz points out, it is worth reading the priestly Sinai narrative *by itself* to see how it coheres as a single narrative in which these movements are spelled out. He makes it convenient to do so in Schwartz, “What Really,” 24–7.
 104. Here Garr quotes Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 409.

105. Garr, *Image*, 206. On the contrast, see further Dillmann and Ryssel, *Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*, 119, 126; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 401; and Meier, “Destroyer.”
106. Consequently, the question asked by many later interpreters, whether the Destroyer or Yhwh acted against the Egyptians, is based on a false dichotomy, at least in the original context of the verse in the J text. For examples of this interpretation (which is arguably a fine reading of the verse in the redacted text), see, e.g., Ramban, Abarbanel; for examples of this issue in texts from late antiquity, see Loewenstamm, *Evolution*, 208–16.
107. See S.R. Driver, *Exodus, ad loc.*, and Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 401–2. Propp points out by way of contrast (408–9) that in the J verse, the noun מַשְׁחִיתָה follows the verb נָתַן (permit), which requires a personal object, not an abstract one (see, e.g., Genesis 20.6, 31.7).
108. Whether P knew the J passage and deliberately altered it (as many biblicists would argue) or P is simply independent of J and differs from it (as Baruch Schwartz would argue; cf. his treatment of the relationship between P’s Sinai story and those of JE in Schwartz, “Priestly Account”) is immaterial to the point I am making. The contrast between the phrasing in P and J is telling, whether or not the contrast was intentionally polemical.
109. Scholars have debated the precise meaning of this punishment in P, but the point I make stands regardless of how we define P’s metaphoric use of the term, which elsewhere takes limbs or trees as its objects rather than humans. To be “cut off” is in some sense to cease to be part of a whole – whether because one has died (the least likely interpretation, it seems to me) or because one has no progeny (or one’s progeny die) so that one does not remain part of the nation in the long run (the most likely interpretation). On the term, its meaning, and its derivation, see especially Schwartz, *Holiness*, 52–7.
110. One scholar has suggested a possible exception to my assertion that priestly and deuteronomistic authors (the former including Ezekiel) reject the notion of divine fluidity. Yadin, “קוֹל,” argues that P (in Numbers 7.89), Ezekiel (at 1.24–6, 2.2, 9.1 and 43.6), and D (at Deuteronomy 4.12) refer to a hypostasis of God known as the קוֹל, which is a visible entity that emerges from but is to some degree independent from Yhwh. The hypostatic Voice whose existence Yadin posits would be a fine example of the fluidity model I described in [Chapter 2](#) and thus a challenge to my contention in this chapter that P, Ezekiel, and D reject the fluidity model. Yadin’s exegetical reasoning is detailed, original, daring, and at times brilliant. It is also, in the end, unconvincing. In each case in which Yadin claims that the Voice can be seen with the eye, it is much easier to understand the perception as involving the ear. Thus, at Ezekiel 43.6, the auditory nature of the phenomenon cannot be avoided. Similarly, in Ezekiel 1.25 (even in the LXX, which Yadin prefers), the prophet does not see the קוֹל; the text merely indicates that he perceived it and knew it was coming from above the firmament over the creatures’ heads. There is no reason to assume that the prophet’s perception involved sight. (Indeed, even with the reading based on LXX that Yadin prefers, וַהֲנִי קוֹל מֵעַל, וַהֲנִי קוֹל מֵעַל, hearing remains possible, because וַהֲנִי can introduce an auditory perception; see Genesis 15.4.) In light of Deuteronomy’s consistent rejection of the visual in favor of the auditory (as demonstrated, e.g., by Geller), the suggestion that קוֹל in Deuteronomy 4.12 can be seen is entirely unlikely. Yadin argues that the voice speaking in Ezekiel 1.28 is separate from God/the *kabod*, because the text there does not specifically link that voice with the *kabod* or God. In fact, Ezekiel’s reticence about the precise origin of the

voice is characteristic of the care and hesitation with which he presents his detailed account of this perceptions throughout [chapter 1](#): The first time he mentions an object, he does so quite objectively, without evaluating it or explaining its origin, as if, initially unsure what it is he is perceiving, he does not want to prejudice his audience by making such an identification. None of the cases Yadin discusses seems likely, and each can be better explained as involving a sound of one sort or another rather than a visible hypostasis.

111. Concerning the latter, see Mettinger, *No Graven, passim*.
112. On these deities, see Röllig, “Bethel,” 174; P. L. Day, “Anat,” 41.
113. Here we may recall that among some Hindus, avatars of Vishnu (in particular, Rama and Krishna) came be seen as deities in their own right. In some forms of Bhakti, devotion to Krishna (and, in devotion to Krishna-the-cowherd, the notion of Krishna as incarnation of Vishnu) may completely recede (even if people loyal to Brahmanical dogma would insist it is assumed). On this sort of devotion to Krishna, see Hardy, “Kṛṣṇaism,” 387–92. In a related development, some devotees of Krishna regard Vishnu as an avatar of Krishna rather than the other way around; see Kinsley, “Avatāra,” 15, and Hawley, “Kṛṣṇa,” 384–5.
114. See the helpful overview in Miller, *Religion*, 61–3. On these deities as hypostases of Yhwh, see already Albright, *Archaeology*, 168–75. Albright unnecessarily dismisses the possibility that these deities result from an Aramean-influenced syncretism at Elephantine (especially in Albright, *From Stone Age*, 373–4), but two factors in fact could have worked in concert: Bethel could be seen as a hypostasis of Yhwh more easily, given that Arameans already worshipped a deity with this name – who in any event was originally a hypostasis of the god inhabiting a betyl or stele.
115. On the northern origin of the Elephantine community, see Albright, *Archaeology*, 171–3; and cf. Gordon, “Origin,” 56–8, who argues that the community originated with Judeans who emigrated to northern regions at a very early period. Van der Toorn, “Anat-Yahu,” 96, argues that both the Jews in Elephantine and Arameans at nearby Syene originated in northern Israel, the latter having been brought to northern Israel in the eighth century (see 2 Kings 17.24–34); for this suggestion, see also Porten, *Archives*, 18.

4: GOD’S BODIES AND SACRED SPACE (1): TENT, ARK, AND TEMPLE

1. A comparison of the category of sacred space in religions around the world shows that a place can be sacred in two different senses. First, a space may be sacred because it is connected with a deity, whether because the deity is currently present there or because the deity revealed him- or herself there in the past. Second, a space may be sacred because it is associated with significant human beings (e.g., it is the birthplace or grave of a saint or the place of a significant victory involving human armies). This second conception is known in many cultures, including certain Jewish cultures (e.g., contemporary Hasidism; Jewry in the Maghreb, especially in Morocco), but it is never present in biblical literature. Sarah Japhet points out that the Hebrew Bible never applies the term קדשׁ or motifs associated with it to places associated specifically with human beings or saints. Indeed, Japhet shows, there is reason to suspect that some biblical texts deliberately oppose such a conception of sacred space. See Japhet, “Sacred Space,” 57–9.

2. So Clements, *God and Temple*, 118; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 574; Levine, “Presence,” 76; de Vaux, “Ark,” 146. On the ritual implications of God’s presence in the sanctuary, see the excellent summary statement in Joosten, *People and Land*, 125–8.
3. See Haran, *Temples*, 236–53. See further de Vaux, “Ark,” 147–8, who notes the placement of treaty or divinely inscribed documents under a god’s feet elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature; this usage corresponds to the ark’s use as container for the tablets and footstool.
4. The precise location from which the *kabod* emerged (that is, the precise spot where the *kabod* generally resides) is not made fully clear. The *kabod* may have emerged from within the holy of holies, into which it presumably had moved after the dedication ceremony for the tabernacle had been completed. This interpretation may be indicated by Leviticus 16.2,13, and cf. the closely related tradition in Ezekiel 10.4, where the *kabod* was located within the holy of holies; so Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 89, and Weinfeld, “Kābōd,” 7:32. Alternatively, the *kabod* may have been located atop the tabernacle, where it was generally hidden from sight by the ‘*anan* (cloud), becoming brighter at times of crisis so that it was visible to all the people through the cloud; so Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 588–90. David Frankel argues that older priestly traditions located the *kabod* within the sanctuary, where it was not visible to the people; thus the holy of holies was Yhwh’s throne room. Later priestly documents, he argues, locate the *kabod* above the tabernacle, where it was visible to the whole nation; thus for the later priestly tradents the tabernacle was a throne, not a throne room. See his article, Frankel, “Two Priestly.” His reading is intriguing, but his reasoning seems based on a questionable conflation of the *kabod* and the ‘*anan* (see especially his remarks on p. 32), against which see Mettinger, 89, and Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 166–7.
5. This ceremony may have occurred immediately after the eight-day dedication, in which case the whole complex of inauguration ceremonies was a grand event lasting twenty days (so Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 693). But the exact date of this ceremony is not clear. The words ביום כלות משה להקים את המשכן in Numbers 7.1 may simply mean “when Moses finished establishing the tabernacle,” not “on the day Moses . . .” (so Milgrom, *Numbers*, 364).
6. See Schwartz, “Priestly Account,” 116–17, and cf. Toeg, *Lawgiving*, 153–7.
7. On the complex issues involved in centralization and the eating of meat in H, see especially Schwartz, *Holiness*, 66–101. On centralization of worship in the final form of the P document, see further n.51 in this chapter and [Chapter 3](#) n.99.
8. Anderson, “To See,” 13, points out another register of the tabernacle’s importance to P: The priestly source, which is generally terse, tending to abbreviate wherever possible, is spectacularly repetitive regarding the tabernacle. Not only is the section prescribing how to build the tabernacle and its furnishings (Exodus 25–31) extraordinarily long; the execution of the instructions is described essentially verbatim (Exodus 35–40). Elsewhere P is content to describe a divine order verbatim followed by the simple phrase “and they did so” with few or no additional details (e.g. Exodus 7.1–5 // Exodus 7.6; Exodus 14.1–4a // Exodus 14.4b; Numbers 5.1–3 // 5.4).
9. I need not enter into the vexing question of the nature of E and the extent to which it can be separated from other non-P material; suffice it to say that the passages under discussion (Exodus 33.7–11, Numbers 11.16–17, and Numbers 12, as well as Deuteronomy 31.13–15, which is not as relevant to my remarks) share a consistent view of the object in question, whatever their relationship to other E or JE or non-P or K^D passages

- may be. On the provenance of Exodus 33.7–11, see the still-useful summaries of the issue in Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2.133, and S. R. Driver, *Exodus*, 358–9.
10. On the identification of the relevant narrative strand in Numbers 11, see Sommer, “Reflecting,” 603–9.
 11. Haran, *Temples*, 263–5.
 12. It is unlikely that the priestly authors actually knew the E texts (on P’s independence from other sources, see Schwartz, “Priestly Account”). Nonetheless, one senses that they are aware of alternate conceptions of the tent of meeting, just as the E authors in Exodus 33.7–11 seem to respond to a conception resembling P’s, whether or not they were familiar with scrolls that contained texts known to us from the priestly sections of the Pentateuch.
 13. See especially the essays collected in J. Z. Smith, *Map*. The following summary relies especially on his comments in “The Wobbling Pivot,” 101–2, and “Map is Not Territory,” 292–3, 308. Smith’s category of the locative resembles Eliade’s archaic ideology of center (famously laid out, for example, in Eliade, *Cosmos*, and in Eliade, *Patterns*, 367–87), but Smith emphasizes that these two viewpoints are not simply early and late, ancient and modern. Rather, each may be available even within a single culture (see especially Smith, 101).
 14. Smith describes the locative viewpoint as “centrifugal” in “Wobbling,” 101, but so far as I can tell, he meant centripetal when he wrote centrifugal and vice versa.
 15. See the frequent reference to ancient Near Eastern conceptions of sacred space in Eliade, *Cosmos*, 6–9, 14–17, and in Eliade, *Patterns*, 375–9. On sacred mountains and the meeting of heaven and earth, see also Gaster, *Thespis*, 181–3; on temples as a microcosm and as pivot, see Nelson, “Egyptian,” 152–4, and the sources collected in Hurowitz, *I Have Built*, 335–37. Note also Nebuchadrezzar’s statement that he made Marduk’s temple “glimmer like the center of heaven” (*kīma kirib šamāmi unammir*), in Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*, 142.1.21. On sacred center and sacred mountain in Mesopotamia and Canaan, see especially the careful presentation of sources in Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 1–97 and 190–2.

The religions of the ancient Near East also display the attitude toward time that typifies the locative or archaic model; see the examples in Eliade, *Cosmos*, 51–92; Frankfort, *Kingship*, esp. 313–33; Gaster, *Thespis*, *passim*. On the neo-Babylonian Akitu festival as exemplifying a locative ideology, see Sommer, “Babylonian Akitu.” There I argue against Smith’s own reading of the festival in J. Z. Smith, *Imagining*, 90–101, 156–62.

16. J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 101.
17. On the tension between the priestly tabernacle and the tent of meeting in E texts, see also Knohl, “Aspects,” and Knohl, *Biblical Beliefs*, 114–30. Knohl connects the P tabernacle to Eliade’s ideology of sacred center (on which Smith’s locative model is based), and he connects the E tent to Victor Turner’s descriptions of liminality (which in some respects recall Smith’s category of the utopian).

On the contrast between the different models of the tent, see also Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies,” 156 ; de Vaux, “Ark,” 145–6; and Haran, *Temples*, 262–9. Note also the insight of Dillmann and Ryssel, *Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*, 335: “For E the tent was probably a substitute for the unmediated closeness to God at Sinai, which was about to be left behind, . . . just as in P, once the tabernacle was erected, God no longer spoke to Moses at Sinai but rather spoke from the tabernacle (Lev 1.1).” Thus, in P, the people build the tent before departing from Sinai because the tent becomes the new

Sinai – that is, a sacred center. In E, they build a tent as they are told to withdraw from Horeb because they desire a surrogate for the sacred center or locus of immanence they are forever leaving behind.

18. For descriptions of this Jerusalemite theology that can profitably be compared with Eliade's notions of sacred center, see Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 19–37; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111–37; and Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 83–94 (note especially his reservations, 93–4). On sacred mountains in the Hebrew Bible, see also the collection of texts in Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 98–101. On what may be referred to as archetypal thinking in the Bible generally, see Fishbane, “Sacred Center,” 6–27.
19. Hebrew, ה' בציון, probably a reference to the local manifestation of Yhwh in the Jerusalem temple, as opposed to Yhwh's heavenly body.
20. See further my treatment of these themes in Psalm 24 in Sommer, *Psalms 1–30*.
21. Concerning this ideology, see especially the treatments in Hayes, “Tradition of Zion's”; Ollenberger, *Zion*.
22. Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 30; cf. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 123–4. It must be stressed that this outlook did not imply that Yhwh was only or exclusively present in the temple. Clements points out that “far from conveying the belief that Yhwh was an earth-bound God, tied to his abode in Jerusalem, the whole outlook and purpose of the temple was to stress his creative and universal action” (Clements, *God and Temple*, 67). The notion that Yhwh dwells in the temple “did not preclude the idea that he was a God of the skies, whose true dwelling was in the heavens but rather presupposed it” (Clements, 68). See Psalms 11.4, cf. 14.2,7; 20.3,7. Levenson makes the same point, pp. 138–40. Thus, at least some of these Zion-Sabaoth texts give evidence of the multiplicity of divine embodiment: God had at least two bodies, one in the heavenly temple and one in the Jerusalem temple.
23. On exilic responses to the collapse of this ideology, see Sommer, *Prophet*, 84–8, 112–19.
24. Clements, *God and Temple*, 120. See the similar point in Wyschogrod, “Incarnation,” 169, who, in an analysis of the temple and the tabernacle, rightly states, “God's affinity to the people [Israel] is thus deeper than his affinity to the land.”
25. Japhet, “Sacred Space,” 63–4.
26. See Haran, *Temples*, 251–4.
27. Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 36.
28. Mettinger argues that the very common epithet, ה' צבאות (“Yhwh of Hosts”), is a short form of the longer title, ה' צבאות יושב הכרובים (“Yhwh of Hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim”); see Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 24. Indeed the short form often appears in texts connected to the notion that the temple is Yhwh's throne (e.g., Isaiah 6.3,5, 8.18; Psalm 24.10, 46.5–8, 48.9–12, 84.2,4,9; and cf. Isaiah 1.8–9; 2 Samuel 7.26–27; Isaiah 48.2; Haggai 1, *passim*).
29. Later traditions combine these two types of imagery. In Ezekiel, God rides a cherub out of the temple so that it may be destroyed (Ezekiel 9–11); later the deity returns and is reenthroned there (Ezekiel 43, esp. verse 3), and cherubs line the walls of the divine palace (Ezekiel 41.18). Thus Ezekiel sees the locomotive model as fitting for a temporary period, but the locative is ultimately restored. 1 Chronicles 28.18 refers to the throne in the Jerusalem as a מרכבה (“chariot”), thus using a locomotive term to describe a locative situation. The association between *heichalot* and *merkabah* mysticism also shows the combination of these two models. The *heichal* (palace) exemplifies the locative. The

- merkabah* (chariot) utilizes the vocabulary of the locomotive (כרכב) to describe God's throne, which is really an manifestation of the locative.
30. Clements, *God and Temple*, 15–16. He cites the work of Alt, which is now available in English: Alt, "God." Clements further acknowledges his debt to Buber, *Prophetic Faith*, 31–42. The contrast between the God of a place and the God of a group of people also appears in Albertz, *History*, 1:131, 136. It appears in a more balanced fashion in Wyschogrod, *Body*, 245, who rightly notes that both models are intrinsic to Judaism (he could have made the same remark about Israelite religion).
 31. Clements, *God and Temple*, 63.
 32. *Ibid.*, 35–66. Clements maintains (36–47) that even before David's conquest, Jerusalem was already a sacred axis associated with the cult of El-Elyon, whom the Jebusites to some extent identified with Baal. As a result, Zion was seen as equivalent to Baal's home on Mount Zaphon. With the Israelite conquest, El-Elyon now merged with the Israelite Yhwh. Consequently, an Israelite text can identify Zion with Zaphon (Psalm 48.3).
 33. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 3–12. Erhard Blum also rejects Alt's thesis, in part using reasoning differing from that of Cross; see Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 495–501 (with additional references). For a balanced discussion of the fate of Alt's thesis, with further references, see Albertz, *History*, 1:26–9.
 34. For the many references in the Ugaritic texts, see Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch*, 293. Other examples are cited in Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 35, and Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 10 n.32, 67, 151. In other respects, Canaanite El displays even more pronounced locomotive tendencies, because he lives in a tent, whereas Baal lives in a more permanent house; see Clifford, "Tent," 223–5.
 35. Cf. Albertz's contention that patriarchal religion is not a preliminary stage of Israelite religion (so Alt) nor a complete fabrication (so some of Alt's critics), but a substratum of Israelite religion as it existed in the Iron Age (Albertz, *History*, 1:29). Further, although Clements' thesis that temples were not originally important in Israelite religion and became prominent only after the rise of monarchy is based on problematic reasoning, William Dever tentatively suggests a similar conclusion for completely different reasons (*viz.*, archaeological ones): "It is perhaps significant that no pre-tenth century B.C.E. temples have yet been found, only household shrines and small open-air sanctuaries. The early [i.e., premonarchical] Israelite cult seems to reflect a simple, agrarian, nonurban society" (Dever, "Contribution," 233).
 36. Haran, *Temples*, 269.
 37. *Ibid.*, 272.
 38. Verbs used to describe divine speech at the tabernacle also reflect this duality, as an anonymous reader of an earlier form of this chapter (Sommer, "Conflicting Constructions") proposed to me: The *qal* verb קרא in Leviticus 1.1 (as in Exodus 19.3,20 and 24.16) suggests a sudden summons of a punctual nature; this depiction of divine speech is reminiscent of E's אהל מועד, for God voice is thrust on Moses as specific moments. But the *hitpael* in מדבר in Numbers 7.89 (as in Ezekiel 2.2 and 43.6) may be durative in nature, suggesting "a constant background of divine speech to which Moses tunes in" (to use the phrasing suggested to me by the anonymous reader).
 39. Some elements of this duality are present even in the temple, though only faintly. The cherubim in the temple may echo the locomotive model, both in light of Psalm 18.11 and because their wings inevitably recall motion and hence the potentially episodic nature of God's presence. Similarly, the ark located in the temple remains, at least vestigially,

an element of mobility. Further, the term *משכן* typically refers to a tent in contrast to a temple; see 2 Samuel 6.7, and note also its parallel to *אהל* in the Hebrew Bible and in Ugaritic texts (Numbers 24.5, etc.; in Aqhat, KTU 1.17.5.32–33; in Kirta KTU 1.15.3.18–19; see further Dahood, “Ugaritic-Hebrew,” 1:102–3). But the Hebrew Bible sometimes uses the term as a synonym for the temple (Psalm 74.7, Ezekiel 37.27, 1 Chronicles 6.33, 2 Chronicles 29.6). This emphasis on the episodic nature of the divine presence in the temple comes to the fore especially in Ezekiel 8–10, though Ezekiel returns to a strongly locative model in chapters 40–48. If Richard Elliott Friedman is correct that the temple actually contained the old tabernacle (see Friedman, *Exile*, 48–61), then the whole tension found in the tabernacle is present within the temple. Further, in light of Friedman’s proposal one might conclude that the tension is resolved in favor of the locative model, because ultimately the tabernacle comes to rest on Zion. See, however, the detailed critique of Friedman’s theory in Hurowitz, “Form,” 127–51.

40. This argument is very widespread in modern biblical studies. See the classic statement by Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 34–8. See further the bibliography in Haran, *Temples*, 194 n.10. Haran himself argues that the priestly tabernacle originally symbolized the temple in Shiloh, not Solomon’s temple, but he agrees with Wellhausen that the priestly tabernacle is essentially a cipher for a centralized and centrally located temple; see 198–204.
41. In this case, just as in P the tabernacle sets the pattern for the temple, so P’s camp is a paradigm for the land of Israel. On this paradigmatic relationship, see especially the nuanced treatment in Joosten, *People and Land*, 145–8.
42. On the similarities between tabernacle and Solomon’s temple, see Haran, *Temples*, 189–94, as well as Zevit, *Religions*, 340–2. Incidentally, Haran points out (192–4) that the priestly tabernacle most closely matches the Solomonic temple as described in 1 Kings 6–7, whereas it differs in significant ways from the Jerusalem temple known from the time of Ahaz, Hezekiah, and later, which had been subject to some renovations and additions; that is, the priestly tabernacle closely resembles the Jerusalem of the early First Temple period, not of the later First Temple period. This datum has considerable significance for our dating of the priestly documents.
43. The text of 1 Kings 6 does not mention the bronze altar outside the temple, but the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles 4.1 describes it. It was originally mentioned in 1 Kings 6, but the verse fell out due to haplography, as noted by David Noel Freedman in Cogan, *1 Kings*, 289, and by Japhet, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 564.
44. The east-west orientation is made clear from 1 Kings 7.39 (assuming, quite reasonably, that the Sea and lavers were located before the front door of the temple and not behind the back of the inner sanctum).
45. On the status of the porch, see Zevit, “Preamble,” 80, as well as Monson, “‘Ain Dara,” 288. On its lack of a roof, see Cogan, *1 Kings*, 237–8.

One other apparent difference between the tabernacle and temple might be noted: The latter was surrounded by additional side chambers, which were probably storage rooms. Nevertheless, 1 Kings 6.5–6 make clear that these rooms were not considered to be part of the temple structure itself, as noted by Zevit, *Religions*, 340–1.

46. According to several texts from Chronicles, on the other hand, the temple had ten tables (as opposed to the single table mentioned in 1 Kings 7.48). See the detailed discussion of the issue in Haran, *Temples*, 189 n.1. In any event, the parallel between tabernacle and temple remains clear.

47. Haran, *Temples*, 158–64, 190–1.
48. As Haran points out (Haran, *Temples*, 196), “P appears to be completely unaware of any other house of God which might be built at any other time, under other conditions.” On traces of antitemple ideology in P, see Haran, 197 n.14 and references there. See also Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:116.
49. On all these parallels, see Cross, “Priestly Tabernacle,” 217–21; Kellermann, “Miškān,” 5:66; and cf. Haran, *Temples*, 194–9. Further, the priestly tabernacle shows significant points of contact with the abode of El described in Canaanite myth, which is portrayed as a tent rather than a palace or building; see Cross, “The Priestly Tabernacle in the Light of Recent Research,” 94–7, and Clifford, “Tent,” 221–7.
50. Fleming, “Mari’s Large,” especially 496–8. On the wooden beams, see 489–93. On the seemingly odd interchange of Akkadian *s* at Mari with Hebrew *š* in קרש/*qersu(m)*, see 487 n.12.
51. See Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 34–8. This closest P comes to explicitly stating a law of centralization is in Leviticus 17; see especially Haran, “Idea,” as well as the brief but helpful comments in Blum, *Studien*, 337–8. A condemnation of multiple sanctuaries probably lies behind Numbers 33.50–6. See further n.7 in this chapter and [Chapter 3](#) n.99.
52. Deuteronomy 12 is a composite text that evinces more than one set of ideas relating to cult centralization. According to Deuteronomy 12.8–12, multiple cult places were legitimate from the time of the Israelites’ entry into the land until the time when they achieved rest from warfare with their enemies (that is, in Deuteronomy’s coded language, until the time of Solomon), at which point the laws of cult centralization took effect; a similar though not identical viewpoint is expressed in verses 20–8. According to 11.31–12.7, the law of cult centralization was to be in effect from the moment the Israelites entered Canaan. (On these various viewpoints and their relationship to each other, see Rofé, “Strata,” and Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics*, 39–46.) Nevertheless, all the strata within this passage agree that once cult centralization takes effect, there is one particular location at which sacrifice must take place; the phrasing throughout the passage rejects the possibility that multiple locations might exist serially over time in the post-Solomonic era.
53. On the altogether unlikely possibility that late Dtr authors envisioned cultic worship elsewhere or downplayed the temple’s unique status, see the convincing critique in Knoppers, “Yhwh’s Rejection,” 221–2, 232–4.
54. The priestly narrative breaks off after Joshua 4.19 and resumes in 5.10–12. See Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:326–8. According to Joshua 5.10–12, the people celebrated the Passover, which, in light of the cult centralization required by Leviticus 17, requires the presence of the tabernacle, though it is not mentioned explicitly in these verses. In any event, the Israelites were still located in a single camp in these verses, in the midst of which the tabernacle still stood.
55. The priestly language in these verses is clear (עדה בני ישראל and ויקהל in Joshua 18.1; אלה, the verb נחל in the *piel*, פתח אהל מועד, the *waw*-reversive form of כל in the *piel/pual* in 19.51). Further, this entire scene in chapters 18–19 corresponds to P’s prescriptions in Numbers 34.13–29. See further Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:348, 352. On priestly views of the journeys of the ark after Moses’ death, see also Haran, *Temples*, 198–9.
56. Rofé, “History,” 765.

57. Cf. Japhet, “Sacred Space,” 64, who puts the point perhaps slightly more strongly than the evidence warrants. Professor Marc Brettler points out to me in this connection that the word “Zion” never appears in Ezekiel (as opposed to sixteen times in First Isaiah, fifteen in Second Isaiah, and ten in Jeremiah). The word “Jerusalem” appears more often, but never in the chapters describing the rebuilt temple (40–48).
58. So also Japhet, “Sacred Space,” 63–4.
59. Israel Knohl suggests that PT does not command centralization but that HS (whose main corpus begins with Leviticus 17’s command that all sacrifice take place at one altar) does so. See Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 50 n.10, 112–13 and 204. This suggestion meshes well with a thesis propounded by the archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni. He maintains that the priestly description of the tabernacle was originally based on a temple plan exemplified by the Arad sanctuary. Later, it was altered to conform to the different plan that exemplified Solomonic temple. See Yohanan Aharoni, “Solomonic,” 8. Thus both Knohl and Aharoni view P (for Knohl, in the older priestly traditions found in the PT documents) as originally independent of influence from the Solomonic temple but subsequently (for Knohl, in HS) committed to it.
60. On New Testament affiliations of this vocabulary, see especially G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 72.
61. One may contrast this verb (σκηνώω) with words that indicate more permanent dwelling, such as οικήω or κατοικέω.
62. The suggestion of those scholars goes against the evidence of the LXX, which often uses a form of κατοικέω (=“dwell, inhabit”) to translate the root י״בשׁ; see, e.g., Genesis and 1 Kings 8.12. To be sure, LXX uses the verb σκηνώω (=“to dwell in a tent; to settle”) to translate י״בשׁ with great frequency as well, a circumstance that appears at first to bolster these scholars’ claims. But the variation in translating the various forms of this Hebrew verb shows that it does not have any one denotation in regard to the duration of an object’s dwelling.
63. Cross, “Priestly Tabernacle,” 228. See the kindred approach of Clements, *God and Temple*, 116–20; of G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 71; and of Mettinger, *Dethronement*, 96, 113.

Similarly, the decision to date P later than D spurs some of these scholars to view P’s tabernacle as a response to the deuteronomic Name theology. According to this view, P proposed that God does not dwell (יבשׁ) in the tabernacle/temple but “tabernacles” (יבשׁ) there, and P made this proposal in response to the deuteronomists, who had created a sublimated theological idea with the notion of God’s Name residing in the temple. For such a view, see G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst,” 71, and Cross, “Priestly Tabernacle,” 226–7. For another view that is also based on a presumed postexilic dating of P rather than on a close reading of the text, see Janowski, “Ich will”; for a sense of how the presumption of exilic dating is the starting point for and in fact is a straitjacket on the interpretation of the text, see especially 165–8. On the connection to John 1, see 191–3.

If one is less sure that P is later than D, then there is no reason to see P’s use of the term יבשׁ as a some sort of theological sublimation. By way of contrast, it is worth noting that Moshe Weinfeld argues, I think persuasively, that D’s *shem* theology is a response to the anthropomorphism of the older *kabod* theology, which finds expression in P. See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 191–208.

Finally, we should note that the view according to which we must date Israelite texts that regard God as distant to some point after the catastrophe of 586 B.C.E. is simply

preposterous from the point of view of the history of religions. As Balentine, *Hidden God*, 170–1 points out,

In view of the . . . laments about the deity's aloofness which can be found in Sumero-Akkadian psalms [dating to the second millennium], it can no longer be assumed that this was a problem which Israel confronted for the first time in the sixth century BC . . . It is not wise therefore to imply that there was in the sixth century a sudden, unprecedented shift in Israelite confidence in the presence of God. In point of fact the experience of God's hiddenness appears to have been an integral part of Israel's faith from an early period. Specific crises may have led to a deeper awareness of the extent to which God would withdraw himself, but to focus on such experiences in isolation from the larger framework of which they are a part is to distort the picture.

64. See my lengthy discussion of this issue in n.93 to Chapter 3.
65. A majority of biblical scholars since Julius Wellhausen assume or (in fewer cases) argue that P in its current form is a postexilic document. But Weinfeld, *Place*, has pointed out that two generations of scholars, following the lead of Kaufmann, *Toledot*, have (1) adduced solid grounds for regarding P texts as preexilic and (2) have provided thorough refutations of the arguments used by scholars who argue for a postexilic date. Scholars who continue to maintain a postexilic dating for P have failed to respond to the arguments of the Kaufmannian school, and in many cases they have failed even to acknowledge the existence of these arguments. Weinfeld maintains, I think quite reasonably, that in light of the failure of scholarship to refute the work of those who date P early, the default judgment in the academic community must be that P is early, at least until someone at long last provides solid reasons for suggesting that P may be late. For a review of the relevant literature, see (in addition to Weinfeld's detailed treatment) Zevit, "Converging," and, more briefly, Milgrom, "Priestly ('P') Source," 458–60. It is significant, Zevit points out, that different types of evidence independently point toward P's preexilic date. Of particular import, I believe, is the linguistic evidence, especially in the work of Avi Hurvitz, who has demonstrated that P never uses late biblical Hebrew vocabulary or syntax. Writing the pure pre-Persian-era Hebrew found in P would simply be an impossible feat for postexilic writers, even ones endeavoring to write in an archaic style (unless those authors were extraordinarily well trained in modern linguistics and familiar with modern scholarly methods of analyzing biblical Hebrew, a circumstance that would require us to view the P document as much later than even the Copenhagen/Sheffield School has thus far dated it). See especially Hurvitz, *Linguistic Study*; Hurvitz, "Dating the Priestly Source"; Hurvitz, "Once Again"; and also Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew*, who provides an excellent introduction to the linguistic dating of biblical texts on pp. 23–33. On the dating of Pentateuchal literature generally, see the brief but compelling survey of Schniedewind, *How the Bible*, 81–4.
66. See the programmatic statement of Idel, *Kabbalah*, xii (and cf. his argument that the theory of primeval catastrophe in Lurianic kabbalah should not be seen merely as a response to the events of 1492, pp. 264–6). Similarly, Moshe Greenberg rejects an attempt to reduce a priestly idea to a mere historical reaction to conditions in the Persian era in Greenberg, "Biblical Concept [1995]" (originally published in Greenberg, "Biblical Concept [1959]"), which deals with issues quite different from those under consideration here. Greenberg points out that the idea in question can be more deeply understood as a manifestation of a particular view of sin and its consequences and that the view in question need not be dated to one specific era. Another such example from biblical studies can be seen in Joosten, *People and Land*, 191–2.

67. Here we should recall Smith's insistence (against Eliade) that these models, though competing, need not belong to different periods or cultures; a single culture can incorporate both models (see, e.g., J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 101). In our case, a single symbol expresses both of them.
68. The influence of Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, in the following sentences is clear.
69. On Tammuz and the element of *fascinans*, see Jacobsen, *Toward the Image*, 73–101. On the distance of Anu, for whom there was little or no cult in most periods of Mesopotamian religion even though he was still recognized as high god, see Marcus, "An"; Ebeling, "Anu," 1:116. This is not to say that Anu was otiose; he continues to figure in Mesopotamian myth and in rituals for lower ranking, but more important, gods. Nonetheless, little cultic activity centers around Anu himself. See, e.g., the collection of middle and neo-Babylonian texts in Wohlstein, *Sky God*, 85–97, and cf. Assyrian texts cited there in 140–1.

The same might be said of El at Ugarit. Although the nature of El's status remains a vexing question, the sense of distance between worshippers and El (as opposed to Baal) is clear; see Mullen, *Divine Council*, 9–11. On the remoteness of El in Ugarit, see further L'Heureux, *Rank*, 4–7. This remoteness probably ought to be understood as an abundance of the Ottonian categories of *tremendum* and *mysterium* and an absence of *fascinans*. Thus it is probably wrong to use El's remoteness as evidence of El's alleged dethronement or decline, on which see the dated but clear presentation of the issue in Albright, *Yhwh and the Gods*, 119–21, 140–5. See further the somewhat inconclusive study of Pope, "Status," 58–60, as well as Mullen, 109–110, and L'Heureux, 18–28.

70. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 208. Earlier in the same paragraph, Weinfeld refers to D's "attempt to eliminate the inherent corporeality of the traditional imagery," an attempt that "finds expression in Deuteronomy's conception of the ark." I think that this phrasing is not entirely precise: D does not deny God's corporeality, but insists that God's physical presence never leaves heaven. D writers avoid traditional corporeal imagery not because God has no body but because no human could know what imagery is appropriate to God, because earth-bound humans never see God's body.
71. On the importance of this verse, see Blum, *Studien*, 297.
72. My use of the terms "theocentric" and "anthropocentric" follows Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 189.
73. An apparent exception to this statement appears in Deuteronomy 16.16: "Three times a year your males shall appear before the face of Yhwh (אֵת פְּנֵי ה') your God . . ." (or, if we follow the common emendation [on which see all the standard modern commentaries], "Three times a year your males shall see the face of Yhwh your God"). One might understand this wording to imply that Deuteronomy locates Yhwh's presence (פְּנֵי ה') in the temple. In fact, however, Deuteronomy in this verse is simply providing an almost verbatim quotation from its source in the Covenant Code, Exodus 23.17. As George Adam Smith, *Deuteronomy*, 214, points out, it is clear that in 16.16 Deuteronomy is lifting language from its source, because Deuteronomy 16.11 and 16.14 require women and children as well as men to participate in the festival at the temple, in contradiction to 16.16, which, like Exodus 23.17, mentions only males. (This addition of women and children to what had been a male privilege is typical of Deuteronomy, as Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 291–2, notes in his discussion of this passage.) The apparent contradiction with 16.16 points to the fact that the language of the source

- has not been fully “deuteronomized.” This sort of quotation, in which “a statement has been borrowed from another source and not adapted to the new context” so that it seems somewhat jarring, is quite typical of ancient Near Eastern literature in general and in the Hebrew Bible in particular, as noted by Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew*, 61–2 (the material in quotes comes from p. 62). For further examples of this phenomenon, see Sommer, *Prophet*, 130 and 271 n.54, and Alter, *Pleasures*, 118. For additional evidence that Deuteronomy 16.16 is based on Exodus 23.17, see the convincing stylistic analysis by Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics*, 90–2.
74. On Dtr’s attitude toward these other places, whose temporary legitimacy and importance Dtr acknowledges, see Knoppers, “Yhwh’s Rejection,” 232–4.
 75. See the similar point made by Japhet, “Sacred Space,” 64.
 76. On Deuteronomy 23.15 where the camp is holy, see my remarks in Chapter 3 n.40.
 77. Cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 228, who rightly states, “As opposed to the deuteronomistic concept of the ‘holiness of the people,’ P promulgates the concept of the ‘holiness of the land.’” To be sure, even for P, the land is not inherently holy, but acquires holiness because Yhwh resides there; prior to the Israelite conquest, it was not holy, and after God abandons the temple, it is no longer holy, as Joosten, *People and Land*, 191–2, notes.
 78. This difference also extends to the deuteronomists’ attitude toward the land, which D does not regard as holy. See Rofé, “Summary,” 11–12, and Joosten, *People and Land*, 177–8.
 79. See Rost, *Succession*. More specifically, Rost identifies 1 Samuel 4.1b–18a, 19–21; 5.1–11b^a, 12; 6.1–3b^a, 4, 10–14, 16; 6.19–7.1; 2 Samuel 6.1–15, 17–20a, as the original ark narrative (p. 33). Other scholars define the text somewhat differently. On the scope of the ark narrative or the original document underlying it, see the helpful review of literature in Miller and Roberts, *Hand*, 18–26. Miller and Roberts do not regard 2 Samuel 6 as part of the original document, removing it on the basis of a two-part argument, the first part of which is strong and the second quite weak. First they demonstrate quite convincingly that the ark narrative belongs to an ancient Near Eastern genre they identify that is concerned with the capture and return of divine images. They then make the quite weak assumption that the instance of the genre found in the ark narrative cannot alter the genre or add elements to it to reflect particular concerns. In the end, the connections between 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Samuel 4–6 are extremely strong, and it should be regarded as part of the ark narrative.
 80. Garsiel, *First Book*, 42–3; Polzin, *Samuel*, 55–79; Bar-Efrat, *1 Samuel*, 87; Alter, *David*, x–xi.
 81. The productive tension between the two views of the ark in these chapters recalls the similar friction between proroyal and antiroyal ideologies through the Books of Samuel. As Polzin, *Samuel*, 61, notes, this tension does not merely result from the sloppy redaction of contradictory sources. Rather, this tension is one of the main foci of the final form of the book itself.
 82. In 2 Samuel 6, the ark is with the same family of Levites in a place called Ba‘alei Judah; this may be another name for Kiryat Ye‘arim (see Joshua 15.9), or this family might have moved the ark in the interim, or Dtr’s various sources may recall the location of the ark differently.
 83. The Vaticanus text of the LXX omits “of the covenant” here and in verse 3, thus reflecting only one side of the tension. Consequently, S. R. Driver, *Notes*, 46, and

McCarter, *2 Samuel*, 103, argue that “covenant” was added to various textual traditions (on MT Samuel’s tendency to fill out the shorter formula, see further the remark of Ulrich et al., *1–2 Samuel*, 48). Alternatively, it is possible that verse 3 originally used the covenant language typical of Dtr, whereas verse 4 used the cherubim formula, so that neither formula was long but both ideas (and hence the tension between them) were represented in the text; later texts harmonized in various ways. The expansive texts attested in MT and most witnesses to LXX (to wit, Alexandrinus, many unical manuscripts, and Lucian) may be late, as Driver and McCarter argue. Nonetheless, the expansive texts are to be preferred as the best texts (which is not the same as the most original text) from a literary point of view, because they foreground the tension between the two conceptions of the ark, the resolution of which is the main concern of this narrative.

84. On the Philistines’ several mistakes in these two verses, see Polzin, *Samuel*, 58. Similarly, S. R. Driver, *Notes*, 47, comments that the plural “gods” seems fitting coming from “the mouth of a heathen.” Polzin goes on to point out (59) that in chapter 7 the prophet Samuel will excoriate the Israelites for worshipping many gods – and thus the Philistines spoke more accurately than they know. In the end, the joke is on the Israelites, whose behavior renders the Philistines’ blooper accurate. It turns out to be appropriate that the Israelites suffer as much from the ark as do the Philistines, because the Israelites betray themselves to be the Philistines’ fellow pagans. See further Polzin, 65.
85. Miller and Roberts, *Hand*, 9–17, 76–87.
86. The Book of Samuel does not give a completely clear genealogy for Eli, but the Chronicler implies that Eli was descended from Aaron in 1 Chronicles 24.3 (cf. 1 Samuel 22.9–20). Some modern biblical scholars believe that Eli was in fact a direct descendant of Moses himself; see Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 142–3, and Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 195–217. In either event, the connection between the family of Eli and the priestly traditions preserved in the Pentateuch is prominent.
87. Haran, *Temples*, 199–204; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 29–34.
88. Alter, *David*, 28, 31, and Polzin, *Samuel*, 59 note some of the repetitions of this key term.
89. On the concept of the leading word (*Leitwort*) in biblical narrative, see the classic treatments in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 114–28, 143–50, and also the helpful discussion in Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 92–7.
90. McCarter, *2 Samuel*, 103, suggests deleting the pronoun אֱלֹהֵינוּ, which is not reflected in the Vaticanus manuscript of LXX (though it is in Alexandrinus and many unicals), but Alter, *David*, 22, astutely notes, “The addition of this seemingly superfluous personal pronoun suggests how the elders arrogate to themselves a sacred object for their own purposes, conceiving the ark magically or fetishistically as a vehicle of power that they can manipulate for military ends.” On the other hand, Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, 3:181–2, suggests that אֱלֹהֵינוּ reflects a text that originally read אֱלֹהֵינוּ, so that we can translate, “Let’s get our God along with the ark . . .,” a reading that emphasizes the elder’s (nondeuteronomic) view of the ark as literally containing God.
91. Bar-Efrat, *1 Samuel*, 88.
92. In 1 Samuel 14.3, we learn that Ikabod’s brother Aḥitub had a son named Aḥijah, and in 1 Samuel 22.9, we learn further that Aḥitub had a son named Aḥimelech. Either Aḥijah and Aḥimelech are brothers, or perhaps the names are interchangeable, and they are

one and the same. Some time after the destruction of Shiloh's temple, Ahimelech found employment as a priest at the sanctuary in Nob just north of Jerusalem (roughly, where the Hebrew University campus is now located). Saul massacres this entire family at Nob (1 Samuel 22, especially verse 20), and only Ahimelech's son Abiathar survives (1 Samuel 22.20). (Could the location of the massacre be beneath the room where the university's tenure committee now meets?) Abiathar later serves as one of David's priests in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 8.17), but after supporting David's son Adonijah rather than Solomon to succeed David, he was banished by Solomon to live in the town of 'Anatot just north of Nob (1 Kings 2.26–27), never again to serve as a priest. Jeremiah was born into this same priestly family in 'Anatot (Jeremiah 1.1).

93. On the narrative's desire to make clear what did and did not bring about the Israelites' defeat, see Miller and Roberts, *Hand*, 38; McCarter, 2 *Samuel*, 25, 109, 124–5; and Bar-Efrat, 1 *Samuel*, 88, 91.
94. Alter, *David*, 34.
95. Rost, *Succession*, 26–7.
96. Miller and Roberts, *Hand*, 5.
97. Against the notion that Dtr contains an antitemple ideology, see Knoppers, "Yhwh's Rejection."

5: GOD'S BODIES AND SACRED SPACE (2): DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

1. *Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishma'el, Parashat B'hodesh* §2; the phrase also appears in *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 2§20.
2. For a brief definition, see Cudden, *Dictionary*, 935–6. For Derrida's use of the term, see, e.g., Kamuf, *Derrida*, 28, 133–5, 175–80.
3. My analysis of P's narrative in Exodus 19 – Leviticus 10 here depends on the conclusion that it can be read on its own as a coherent whole independent of the other Pentateuchal sources. This thesis is defended in detail by Schwartz, "Priestly Account." For a clear discussion of the question whether P is a source that can be read independently or is a redactional layer that supplements other sources, see also Carr, *Reading*, 43–7. Carr's conclusion differs slightly from Schwartz's, but he too emphasizes that P can be read as a discrete document. On the delineation of the P source in the Sinai narratives in Exodus 19 – Leviticus 10, see Schwartz, "What Really."
4. These verses in fact stem from J, not P, but they express a view of the goal of the Exodus that P strongly endorses.
5. Erhard Blum points out that according to P at Exodus 29.36, the goal of the liberation from slavery was none other than God's arrival to dwell among Israel, which is to say, the completion of the tabernacle. See Blum, *Studien*, 297. Similarly, Jon Levenson points out that for some biblical traditions, the dedication of the tabernacle, rather than the entry into the land, is the culmination and *telos* of Israel's relationship with God. See Levenson, "Jerusalem Temple," 35.
6. My summary of the priestly view of Sinai and its significant divergence from the J, E, and D accounts follows Schwartz, "Priestly Account," 122–30. Schwartz demonstrates that "in the Priestly version Mount Sinai is not the place of lawgiving. It is merely the place where the *kavod* of God rested before the lawgiving commenced. The laws were given in the tabernacle" (Schwartz, 123). Jacob Milgrom similarly points out the superiority of the tabernacle dedication to Sinai in P and the equivalence of JE's Sinai narrative to

- P's tabernacle narrative; see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 574. Cf. the perceptive remarks of Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 353, and Toeg, *Lawgiving*, 153–7.
7. Scholars are unanimous that neither the legal pericope in Exodus 21–24 nor that in Exodus 34 stems from P.
 8. See Clements, *God and Temple*, 115–6, and Koch, “*‘ōhel*, אֹהֶל,” 1:129. Cf. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:241. A similar interpretation appears already in midrashic literature; see Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 1.3–4.
 9. E. A. Speiser points out that Genesis 1.1–3, the J creation account in Genesis 2.4b–7, and *Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian Epic of Marduk the Creator) begin with the following syntactical structure: temporal clause (*Enuma Elish* lines 1–2 / Genesis 1.1 / Genesis 2.4b), parenthetical clause (lines 3–8 / 1.2 / 2.5–6), main clause (line 9 / 1.3 / 2.7); see Speiser, *Genesis*, 12, 19, and cf. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 43, 93. This structure is also evident in the opening lines of *Atrahasis* (a Babylonian primeval history): temporal clause (lines 1–2), parenthetical clause (3–4), and main clause (5–6) (or, following a different understanding of the opening lines: lines 1, 2, and 3 respectively). For a convincing defense of the understanding of this syntax of Genesis 1.1–3 (against, e.g., Westermann, 94–7), see Skinner, *Genesis*, 12n–15n, and Rashi to v. 1.
 10. The parallels have been widely noted. See Cassuto, *Exodus*, 476–7, 483; Buber, “People,” 18–9; Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Luther,” 62; Blum, *Studien*, 306–1; Janowski, “Tempel und Schöpfung,” who also notes the role that the whole Sinai pericope plays in this structure; and especially Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple Building,” 188–93. Weinfeld also cites midrashim that point out these parallels (188–90 n.4), and he emphasizes the ancient Near Eastern background to this connection between creation and sanctuary. Cf. also Heschel, *Sabbath*, 9–10, 96. The allusion to the Sabbath in Exodus 39–40 confirms what Genesis 1.1–2.4a implies: The tabernacle parallels the Sabbath and hence culminates creation. On the parallel between Sabbath and sanctuary in P, see further Leviticus 19.30 and 26.2. (On the altogether unlikely suggestion of some scholars that the word מִקְדָּשׁ in these two verses refers to something other than the sanctuary, see the refutations in Joosten, *People and Land*, 126 n.124, and Milgrom, 16–22, 1699–1700.)
 11. The erection of the tabernacle is also connected to the re-creation or renewal of the world after the flood, because the tabernacle was completed on the first day of the first month (the month now known as *Nisan*), which is the vernal New Year, just as in P dry land first appeared on that same date (Genesis 8.13). On the importance of this connection, see Levenson, *Creation*, 73–7.
 12. This interpretation is rightly noted in midrash; see *Pesiqta deRab Kahana* §1.4 (Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 1:9), concerning which see the discussion in Schäfer, “Tempel und Schöpfung,” 131–3.
 13. This theme recalls the assertion of Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 137–8, who argues that in PT the pre-Mosaic era is regarded as a time of inferior knowledge of God.
 14. Toeg points out that it is central in a textual sense as well as in narrative and ideological senses: The halfway point of the Torah is Leviticus 8.7–8 (counting by verses) or Leviticus 10.15 (counting by words). See Toeg, *Lawgiving*, 158 n.131, and the Masoretic notations.
 15. On the importance of the eating of the offering, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 635.
 16. Interestingly enough, the only other text that might be analogous to the post-Hebrew Bible notion of Original Sin is also located in the aftermath of the Sinai event and also involves Aaronic worship gone awry: the JE narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32.

17. On the unreadability of this narrative, see especially Greenstein, “Deconstruction,” 36–46. On various rabbinic attempts to read the story, see Shinan, “Sin,” 201–14.
The need to offer interpretations of this odd text was felt already in the biblical period. HS added 10.6–11 to the narrative (on the secondary nature of these verses, see Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 51–2, and Wellhausen, *Composition*, 140, 147). Verses 8–11 contain a law prohibiting priests from drinking alcohol when serving at the tabernacle. By adding this law specifically here, HS suggests (through what the rabbis call *semukhin parshayot*) that Nadab and Abihu attracted divine wrath by drinking before approaching the altar. Thus the rabbis who accused Aaron’s sons of drunkenness (see references in Shinan, 208) read the text as edited by HS correctly, though the original PT text remains enigmatic. A similar attempt to clarify the story in chapter 10 appears in PT itself, in Leviticus 16.1–2, which implies that Aaron’s sons improperly entered the holy of holies rather than standing outside it. This reading (which is not merely a case of inner-biblical interpretation but inner-priestly interpretation) was picked up by the rabbis (see Shinan, 206), though Milgrom demonstrates its improbability (Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 634).
18. See especially Jobling, “Myth,” 20–4, and Barr, *Garden*, 4–14. Even the death sentence that the expulsion precipitates may be seen as a moral gift rather than a punishment; see Greenberg, “True Meaning,” 218–20.
19. So far as I know, the first person to note the importance of this absence was Fromm, *You Shall*, 23. See further Naidoff, “Man,” 2–3; Meyers, *Discovering*, 87–8. A more nuanced view of sin in this story is presented by Bird, “Male and Female,” 191–3.
20. Cf. Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 18.
21. On this tendency of Near Eastern thought, especially evident in creation narratives, see nn. 23 and 101 in [Chapter 1](#).
22. Adam’s statement in Genesis 2.23 is not a full-fledged naming; see Tribble, *God*, 99–102.
23. See Jobling, “Myth,” 24–6. Similarly, Haag, “Themata,” 87, sees a dominant “Sündenfallthema” combined with a subsidiary “Garten/Lebensbaumthema.”
24. See the discussion and references in Jobling, “Myth,” 24–7. On formalist readings of biblical narrative, see especially Barton, *Reading*, 114–19.
25. Interestingly, many aspects of Jobling’s formalist/structuralist reading of Genesis 2–3 also appear in Gnostic literature. For some Gnostics, the serpent or Eve is the hero of the Eden narrative, and Eden is a place of imprisonment masquerading as paradise. The divided Yhwh of Jobling’s reading (who is both Sender and Opponent) is paralleled by the two gods of Gnostic readings, one of whom is an evil and ignorant creator, and the other, the true God of gnosis. See Jonas, *Gnostic*, 92–4, and Pagels, *Adam*, 68–9 and 77.
26. See Jobling, “Myth,” 135 n.6. Roland Barthes found the same phenomenon in another passage, the story of Jacob’s wrestling; see Barthes, “Struggle,” 31.
27. One can argue that the marriage was consummated already in Eden; so Rashi to 4.1. However, the opposite interpretation is also possible; see ibn Ezra and Radak to 4.1. The latter reading is grammatically superior; compare Kautzsch, *GKC*, §106e and §106f, and cf. Kamin, *Rashi’s*, 229 n.40. For a contextual-thematic argument that reproduction makes best sense after the loss of the tree of life, see Blum, “Gottesunmittelbarkeit,” 24. Even if one insists on adopting Rashi’s reading, the textual placement of 4.1 immediately after the homecoming remains significant in light of the Proppian schema. The debate on whether there was sex in Eden is an old one; on the interpretive nature of this debate in midrashic and patristic exegesis, see Anderson, “Celibacy,” 121–48.

28. Jobling, “Myth,” 27–8.
29. Jobling, “Myth,” 32–40. Alternatively, one might see these elements as stemming from different compositional layers. Indeed, many scholars have attempted to reconstruct an original base text and substantial redactional additions in Genesis 2–3; these scholars maintain that the latter introduce the mythic themes of sin and punishment. See especially Carr, “Politics,” 577–88, and see further the literature cited in 583 n.20 there as well as the review of literature in Blum, “Gottesunmittelbarkeit,” 10–13, summarized in the chart on 27. Similarly, David Wright, “Holiness,” notes tensions within these chapters between motifs that show the Garden to be holy and motifs that belie its sacrality; he resolves this important tension by arguing that J combined two very different traditions to form these chapters. It seems more likely to me that we have in Genesis 2–3 a single composition that deliberately presents a complex picture of complex characters and a complex sacred space; the self-contradictions in the characters of God and humanity that Carr describes so well on p. 83 reflect artful characterization and not, as Carr suggests, multiple authorship. On the other hand, even if Carr, Wright, and earlier scholars are correct in regarding the text as composite, the analysis of the final form of the text remains valid, and the tensions I describe above result not from artful composition but from artful supplementation and redaction. Indeed, Wright suggests (328–9) that J deliberately left the tensions intact and even intensified them when reworking these traditions, though Wright does not pursue the thematic and religious implications of J’s redactional decision.
30. On an unresolved tension between two voices or structures in Genesis 2–3, see Casalis, “Dry,” and cf. the judgment of Carr, “Politics,” 594, that the final form of Genesis 2–3 includes conflicts that resist interpretive closure. Related to this is the questions of whether wisdom and its acquisition through eating the fruit has been a boon or not, and whether what Blum refers to as “blessed immaturity” is ultimately to be valued or not; see Blum, “Gottesunmittelbarkeit,” 21–22, and his comments on the text’s ambivalence, 25.
31. E.g., Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 275–6; Evans, *Paradise Lost*, 19–20. See also Barr, *Garden*, 11, who points out the absence of any atmosphere of guilt, tragedy, or catastrophe in Genesis 3. As Aryeh Cohen points out to me, Maimonides suggests, but firmly rejects, a similar argument in Maimonides, *Guide*, §1.2, pp. 23–6. There the objector to whom Maimonides responds maintains that as “punishment” for eating the fruit Adam and Eve receive humanity’s noblest characteristic, namely, intellect. For a discussion of the relevant passage, see Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides*, 173–98, and Berman, “Maimonides,” 1–15, esp. 6, where Berman notes an affinity between this reading and Gnosticism; cf. n.25 in this chapter.
32. Similarly, even though sin does not appear to be a concern of the story itself, it is not wholly inappropriate to sense that the text hints at it. As Bird points out, this first J narrative introduces “the crime-and-punishment scheme used to structure each of the major episodes of the Primeval History (4:1–6; 6:1–4; 11:1–10)” (Bird, “Male and Female,” 179).
33. The assertion of the identity of Eden and death, incidentally, is stated explicitly by the character God in a late twentieth-century play: Meged, *Bereshit*, 120.
34. The connection of beginnings to exile continues throughout J’s primeval history. See Genesis 4.12,14 in the story of Cain and Abel (the first naturally born humans) and 9.9 in the story of the tower of Babel. But these stories do not display as complex a notion of exile as we find in Genesis 2–3.

35. P already introduced Abram and gave his genealogy in chapter 11, but in J this character first appears in 12.1.
36. On the importance of this wording, see the comments of Radak, Ralbag, and Cassuto, *Genesis, ad loc.* Cf. Carr, *Reading*, 180–1, who notes that Abram does not settle down until 13.12 or 13.18.
37. Cf. J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 109, 135. On the desert as a preparatory and transitional location, see also Talmon, “Desert Motif,” 37; on the desert as a mythical realm of chaos and death in ancient Semitic religions generally, see Talmon’s remarks on 43–4.
38. Appropriately so, because he has passed through a place of chaos. In the Hebrew Bible, one often moves through a place of chaos, a place that is neither here nor there, on the way from exile to home. The Israelites spend forty years in the wilderness before arriving in their land; Deutero-Isaiah stresses repeatedly that the exiles will not return from Babylonia on the normal route along the fertile crescent but will traverse the desert (see especially Isaiah 35), because a return that does not pass through the desert and thus fails to re-create the Exodus event is not really a return at all.
39. In fact, this old Semitic name is probably to be derived etymologically from this root; so Greenberg, *Understanding*, 49; Cassuto, *Exodus, ad loc.* (who also notes that the name echoes the root שׁוֹרֵר from verse 17).
40. So, e.g., Greenberg, *Understanding*, 49; Seforno *ad loc.* See also Abarbanel *ad loc.* (answer to the third question), who sees the name as referring either to his status as a stranger in Midian or to Moses’ period of wandering after leaving Egypt (“his homeland,” as Abarbanel calls it) and before arriving in Midian.
41. This possibility is also recognized by Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, 12–3, who rejects the standard explanation, and by Jacob, *Second*, 42, who recognizes the significance of both possibilities. An anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press points out to me that support for this possibility may come from Exodus 18.3–4, where Moses seems to relate the name of his other son, Eliezer, to his experience in Egypt.
42. Joseph Blenkinsopp does in fact suggest that the Eden narrative may present a metaphorical recapitulation of Israelite history viewed from the perspective of exile. See Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 66.
43. See Richard M. Wright, *Linguistic*. Wright examines forty features of J’s language that can be compared to Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), and in each one J employs the linguistic features characteristic of preexilic Hebrew rather than exilic or postexilic Hebrew. It is worth comparing Wright’s linguistic method with Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 65. Blenkinsopp attempts to link the Eden narrative’s vocabulary with Late Biblical Hebrew, but his argumentation depends entirely on an argument from silence. Wright, on the other hand, carefully utilizes linguistic oppositions between the vocabulary of J and that of LBH in order to demonstrate the temporal priority of the former. On the unreliability of Blenkinsopp’s method for the dating of Hebrew as early or late, see the decisive remarks of Hurvitz, “Once Again.” Although Hurvitz discusses Blenkinsopp’s attempt to analyze P’s language, his remarks are equally valid in regard to Blenkinsopp’s attempt to analyze that of J.
44. On the dating of Ezekiel’s language, see Hurvitz, *Linguistic Study*, 149–55, and Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew*, 65–186, esp. 177–86.
45. See further Morton Smith, “Differences,” 391.
46. Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image.”

47. These verses must have been written prior to 722 and are not late interpolations. A post-722 hand would not have added references to exile in Egypt, because, as it turned out, northern Israelites were not sent into exile there, contrary to Hosea's prediction.
48. For bibliography, see n.13 in [Chapter 4](#).
49. Smith describes the locative viewpoint as "centrifugal" in J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 101, but he seems to have meant centripetal when he wrote centrifugal and vice versa.
50. Appropriately enough, this passage is cited in Eliade, *Patterns*, 228–9 and 437.
51. Frankfort, *Kingship*, 151–4; Nelson, "Egyptian," 153; Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 25–9. On this theme, see also the references to Eliade in n.13 in [Chapter 4](#).
52. Ezekiel 28 connects Eden and Zion; see the discussion in Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 128–35, and Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 87–93. The simile in Isaiah 51.3 creates the same link. Postbiblical Jewish and Christian literatures amplify this nexus. Eden serves as the prototype of the temple in Jubilees 4.23–6 and in the writings of Ephrem; see Anderson, "Celibacy," 129, 142–5. 1 Enoch implies that the Temple Mount will be equated with Eden at the eschaton, whereas Ben Sira hints that the Second Temple itself is Edenic; see Himmelfarb, "Temple." Eden is linked with Zion and Zaphon in rabbinic literature; see Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 2.217 §170. Further, some midrashim maintain that the world was created from Zion, thus echoing the motif known from Egyptian literature mentioned in n.51; see the discussion in Schäfer, "Tempel und Schöpfung," 123–4. Some ancient Jewish apocalyptic and mystical texts maintain that the locus of creation is identical to that of both revelation and sacrificial worship; see Pedaya, "Divinity as Place," 87.
- Similarly, late biblical and rabbinic texts explicitly connect Abram with Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 3.1, Mount Moriah is identified with Jerusalem. This identification is repeated in Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.226–7 (I.xiii.2) and in rabbinic texts; see the texts cited in Kasher, 3.775–6. The hinted linkage between Abraham and Jerusalem in Genesis 14 is drawn out clearly in rabbinic texts. See Kasher, 3.613 §102–3 and Targums Onkelos and Jonathan to Genesis 14.18. On the linkage between Abraham and Jerusalem in biblical texts, see further Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 114–23.
53. The river that flows out of Eden breaks into four branches, one of which is called "Gihon" (Genesis 3.13), which is also the name of the spring that provides water in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32.20). But the Gihon in Genesis 3 is said to flow around Cush, not Judah. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 130–1, is probably right that J uses the term "Gihon" to link Eden with Jerusalem, but the tentative and exceedingly subtle nature of this link should not be overlooked.
54. To borrow a term from J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 88–104.
55. One might argue that the Hebrew Bible knows no notion of sacred land, per se, but only notions of sacred city and *promised* land. But just as the city in which the Temple Mount is found shares some of its sacrality, so too the land as a whole may be regarded as an extension of the sacred mountain. Cf. the parallelism in Ugaritic between a god's throne (=temple), city, and land in the texts cited by Clements, *God and Temple*, 53. Thus in Exodus 15.17, "the mountain of Your inheritance" where God plants his people (and which is parallel to God's own dwelling place and temple) is likely to be the whole land of Israel; so according to Ginsberg, "Strand," 45 n.4. This parallel is explicit in Isaiah 57.15. See further Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 136.
56. See Haran, *Temples*, 236–53.
57. So Clements, *God and Temple*, 118; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 574; Levine, "Presence," 76.

58. See Shinan, “Sin,” 204–12.

59. Cf. Greenstein, “Deconstruction,” 43, who rightly notes,

The presupposition that there is a reason [for their death] not only motivates the search . . . ; it necessarily posits, or superimposes, the structure of sin and punishment on the story If, for argument’s sake, the narrative of Nadav and Avihu meant to challenge or subvert the absolute rationality of the Torah, the scrutability of divine retribution, we could never find such a meaning were we to posit the pervasiveness of the sin-and-punishment pattern.

It is significant that this whole comment can apply perfectly well to Genesis 3 if we simply substitute “Adam and Eve” for “Nadav and Avihu.”

60. Haran, *Temples*, 188.

61. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 634–5.

62. See texts cited in Milgrom, 635; Shinan, “Sin,” 202; and cf. Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 2:66 n.16 (=Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 364 n.21).

63. See Milgrom, *Studies*, 5. Precisely the same usage continues, incidentally, in modern Hebrew, in the street sign stating “אין חניה, רכב זר יגורר” (“No parking – a vehicle that is *zar* will be towed”). The vehicle is not inherently *zar*; only its location makes it so, and if parked a few meters further up the street it would not be.

64. Cf. Greenstein, “Deconstruction,” 45, who makes a very similar point:

Notwithstanding the cultic regulations, all of which posit that reward and punishment follow directly from obedience to or violation of divine prescriptions, God has not in fact explained everything. The system contains terrible dark secrets, Yhwh may strike without warning. The system of the cult rationalizes, sets things in order Lest God become altogether manipulable by the cult, the episode of Nadav and Avihu . . . subverts the orderly ritual’s implication of orderliness by asserting Yhwh’s unpredictability and autonomy, Yhwh’s sheer transcendence.

On the inherent danger of the work undertaken by Nadab and Abihu, see also Savran, *Encountering*, 190–1.

65. The term comes from the royal court, referring to high-ranking officials who have the right to approach the king. So Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1–16, 600–1, and Levine, *Leviticus*, 59.

66. J. Z. Smith, *Map*, 97.

67. This is the case also in narratives regarding the construction of the temple. When David brings the ark to reside in Jerusalem, God’s presence in the ark strikes Uzzah dead though he is not at fault (2 Samuel 6.6–8). The construction narrative in Chronicles begins only following the plague in 1 Chronicles 21; see n.69 in this chapter. It may be precisely because an irruption of divinity in the created world is so dangerous that E locates the tent outside the camp: The people must be protected from the divine presence. See Aḥituv, “Countenance,” 4.

68. On Eden as an *axis mundi*, see Fishbane, “Sacred Center,” 9, and on the connection between Eden and the tabernacle, 18 n.29.

69. This biblical suspicion is not limited to the Pentateuch. Other texts in the Hebrew Bible also intimate that beginnings incorporate disaster or exile. The narrative in 1 Samuel concerning the beginning of kingship, for example, narrates a tragic false start (Saul) followed by a promising success that goes dangerously awry (David). (In later Jewish thought, the redemption will follow a similar pattern, because a failed northern Messiah will precede the Davidic king.) The Book of Ruth begins with exile that leads to death. There, too, the narrative complicates the notion of exile: Naomi’s return home entails

Ruth's exile, which, like Abram's, is ultimately not an exile at all, because her progeny will rule over that land. Most significantly for our concerns, the temple narrative in Chronicles begins with sin and plague: The site of the temple is determined when the angel of destruction who punishes Israel for David's census stops his work at what became the Temple Mount (1 Chronicles 21.14–22.1). The link between this story and the building of the temple is enhanced by the fire that comes down from heaven when David offers sacrifices at the beginning of Chronicles' temple narrative (1 Chronicles 21.26). This event is echoed at the end of Chronicles' temple narrative, when Solomon offers the first sacrifice (2 Chronicles 7.1–2, which borrow from the P description of the tabernacle's inauguration in Exodus 40.35 and Leviticus 10.24). My thinking about תחילת קשורה in the Bible generally owes much to enlightening discussions with Professor Yair Zakovitch.

70. One recalls here Jacques Derrida's assertion that the present is generally not original but reconstituted (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 212), and his discussion of the endless deferral of immediate presence or originary perception. "Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 157).

6: THE PERCEPTION OF DIVINITY IN BIBLICAL TRADITION: IMPLICATIONS AND AFTERLIFE

1. Now is as good a moment as any to acknowledge that there are, of course, other conceptions of God in the Hebrew Bible in addition to the two I discuss throughout this book. In particular, other texts focus not so much on God as having a personality as on God as a force of justice or equilibrium and as a source of wisdom. This conception is found especially in the wisdom traditions preserved in Proverbs, in parts of Job, and in some of the psalms. Another sort of impersonal conception is present in the earlier stratum within priestly literature, which Israel Knohl calls the Priestly Torah, though PT attributes some degree of personality when it portrays perceptions of God in the pre-Mosaic period. See Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 125–8 (on the connection of this conception to wisdom literature, especially Job, see further 165–7).
2. Erhard Blum describes Genesis 1 as providing instruction on how to read the second creation story in Genesis 2–3 that follows (see Blum, "Gottesunmittelbarkeit," 16). What he says applies not only to the second creation story but to the entirety of the Pentateuch. Indeed he makes this point more broadly regarding the whole Pentateuch in *Studien*, 234–5. One need not agree with every aspect of Blum's characterization of the priestly work to recognize that the placement of P material in the Pentateuch has a profound effect on the reader of the non-P material.
3. Weippert, *Prosareden*, 228–34. On deuteronomic influences on Ezekiel, see Kohn, "Prophet," 246–8.
4. Concerning biblical and archaeological evidence for Israelite polytheism, see the discussions in the Appendix, starting at p. 149 and p. 150, respectively.
5. I think, for example, of Genesis 6.1–4, Exodus 15.11, and Psalm 89.8. All these, read in isolation from their context, could be understood either as polytheistic or monotheistic, but all three function as monotheistic polemic in their current biblical context. See further the discussion in the Appendix, pp. 160–1, 171–2.
6. For my understanding of the meaning of these overlapping roles, see Sommer, "Neues Modell," and Sommer, "Dialogical esp. 14–15, 20–21."

7. Cf. the notion of “accumulating revelation” in Ross, *Expanding*, 197–210. Ross’s model resembles Louis Jacob’s idea of “continuous” or “progressive revelation” and similar ideas in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, but Ross’s idea is distinctive precisely in its emphasis on embracing that which one might want to pass over or move beyond.
8. On the relationship between the terms, see further Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 468–70, who points out that the rabbis use *shekhinah* in place of *kabod* only when the latter term is used in the sense of the Godhead that has entered the sanctuary or that reveals Itself – that is, in the concrete sense the term has in priestly texts in the Hebrew Bible. The identification of the rabbinic *shekhinah* with the biblical *kabod* is already suggested by medieval Jewish philosophers who, however, regarded it as a created being separate from God. See the summary in Urbach, *Sages*, 40. In contrast, one should note different valences of the biblical and rabbinic terms, concerning which see the remarks of Gordon Tucker in Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 359 n.[1].
9. See the comments of Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 38–40, who notes further parallels based on the *Mekhilta* passage. For further examples of this verbal interchange, see the passage in *Sifra*, Thirteen Principles 2.8, and *Sifre Zuṭa Naso* 7.89 cited in Goldberg, 41–2, as well as the passages from *Bemidbar Rabbah* 12.3 and *Midrash Tehillim* 90.19 that he cites in 69–70. This interchange occurs especially in several cases in *Pesiqta Rabbati*; Goldberg enumerates the relevant texts, 469 n.21.
10. On the connection between the brightness of the *shekhinah* and that of the *kabod*, see, e.g., Wolfson, *Speculum*, 43–4.
11. See further Urbach, *Sages*, 44–7, who, however, argues that the light is not identical with the *shekhinah* but comes from it, a distinction that seems to go rather further than most of the texts.
12. Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 147–8; Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 457–8, with a convenient list of examples, 458 n.2; and Schäfer, *Mirror*, 89. In contrast, sometimes the term *shekhinah* is used in a very different sense, to refer to a form of divine communication to a prophet; see, e.g., *Mekhilta Beshallah* 2 (ad Exodus 14.13), and see Goldberg’s discussion of the relationship between *shekhinah* and prophetic spirit, 465–8. Urbach, *Sages*, 54, suggests that this use of the term refers only to the manifestation of divine communication from the *shekhinah*, not literally to the *shekhinah* itself.
13. See, e.g., the texts discussed in Urbach, *Sages*, 52–5, 57, and Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 1:54–64 = Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 94–103. Heschel sets these (Aki- van) views against an opposing (Ishmaelian) point of view, according to which the *shekhinah* is everywhere. For this notion, see especially b. *Baba Batra* 25a, where both sides of the debate are made clear. The midrash in *Tanḥuma* (Buber) *Naso* 6, ed. Buber 16a (concerning which see the helpful remarks in Lorberbaum, *Image*, 437–8) presents a variant of this second notion: that God is in all places but the *shekhinah* is forced to leave a place where adulterers commit their sin. This notion is closer to panentheism, which is not at all the same as the idea of multiplicity of embodiment I have described; on the difference, see my remarks on p. 141 of this chapter. For another passage presenting something resembling panentheism, see further the teaching attributed variously to Rabban Gamaliel (in Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 1:4, and cf. his teaching in b. *Sanhedrin* 39a), and to Yehoshua ben Qorḥa (in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 3:21 ad Song 3.9). On the other hand, these texts may only intend to state that the *shekhinah* could manifest itself anywhere, not that it actually is in all places at all times.

14. Other rabbinic texts speak of God's descent or the *kabod's* descent on Sinai; see the references in Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 2:58–70 = Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 359–67.
15. See further Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 2:59 = Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 359–60, and Lorberbaum, *Image*, 448–9 n.38. For amoraic and medieval attempts to reconcile the two sorts of views, one closer to the priestly view in the Hebrew Bible and one closer to the deuteronomic, see the discussion in Urbach, *Sages*, 49 and 704 n.43.
16. A similar view is attributed to Rabbi Akiba in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 8:15 ad Song 8.11, concerning which see Schäfer, *Mirror*, 89–91.
17. Discussing the “confinement” (*šimšum*) of God in one place (e.g., the tabernacle) in *Pesiqta deRav Kahana* (ed. Mandelbaum, 1.73) and *Shemot Rabbah* 34.1, Urbach states, “The confinement of the Shekhina in one place does not imply withdrawal from another place” (Urbach, *Sages*, 50). Urbach aptly cites the analogy of the cave that appears in *Shemot Rabbah* 45:3, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 3:20, *Pesiqta deRav Kahana* (ed. Mandelbaum, 1.4) and parallels; whether, however, this analogy is to be seen as indicating multiple embodiment or something like panentheism is not clear.
18. Schäfer, *Mirror*, 96. See also Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 350.
19. Schäfer, *Mirror*, 97–100. See also the texts cited in Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 463 nn.17–20, and in Urbach, *Sages*, 43, esp. nn.21–3.

Many scholars attempt to dismiss the evidence of these cases. Goldberg minimizes the importance of these examples, using a number of techniques to dismiss the evidence. In some cases, he notes that the texts that personify the *shekhinah* are late (as if, being late, they somehow don't count); regarding other cases, he casts doubt on the accuracy of the text or points out alternative readings in parallel texts. In many cases, he calls the personification of the *shekhinah* merely “poetic” so that the text “usually makes clear that it does not intend to be understood literally.” See Goldberg, 462, and see further his comments on 535–6, where he attempts to draw a sharp line between rabbinic conceptions of the *shekhinah* and later kabbalistic ideas of divine hypostases and semi-independent entities within the Godhead. Similarly, 63–4, he denies that they should be understood to imply that the *shekhinah* has any level of distinction. Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 148–9, also tries to minimize the extent to which pre-kabbalistic texts speak of the *shekhinah* as having any degree of independence from the Godhead (in other words, he attempts to deny any mythical aspect to the rabbinic notion *shekhinah*), dismissing the passage from *Midrash Mishle* as late (152–3).

Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the many examples noted by Goldberg in his notes on 462 and by Urbach, 43, suffices to show that they attest to a real, if somewhat atypical, rabbinic theology. Regardless of their dates, most of them are unambiguously prekabbalistic and, to use Scholem's term, mythical; or to use my terminology, they attest to the ancient Near Eastern notion of fluidity of divine selfhood. That parallel texts sometimes provide alternate readings demonstrates that not all rabbinic authors or editors accepted this theology – which simply shows that the ancient debate I describe in this book continued in rabbinic literature.

20. Schäfer, *Mirror*, 101–2, and, more briefly, Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 54.
21. Somewhat surprisingly, neither Schäfer nor Scholem attends to the complex grammar of the crucial clause in Pseudo-Jonathan Deuteronomy 31.3, where the compound subject, “God and His *shekhinah*,” takes the masculine singular participle עביר rather than what we might have expected, עבירין. As Professor Steven Fassberg points out to

me, in biblical Aramaic it is quite common that a compound subject, whether before or after the predicate, takes a predicate in the singular; see, e.g., Daniel 3.31, 4.33, 7.27; and Rosenthal, *Grammar*, §180. It seems likely that here Pseudo-Jonathan's highly artificial Aramaic imitates the biblical norm. Consequently, both "God" and "His *shekhinah*" are the subjects of the verb in this clause, which is to be rendered, "Yhwh your God and His *shekhinah* pass before you; He [referring to God, not the grammatically feminine noun *shekhinah*] will smite these nations . . ." The movement back and forth between God alone as subject, on the one hand, and God and *shekhinah* together as subject, on the other, is perfectly understandable as an example of the fluidity model: God is the same as the *shekhinah*, but the *shekhinah* does not exhaust God, so one can refer easily to "God" and subsequently to "God and the *shekhinah*." Given the apparent disjunct between the number of the subject and the verb in this passage from Pseudo-Jonathan, one might have wanted to see the phrase ושכינתיה as a gloss that brings verse 3 into line with the conception found in verse 6, where we find the *causus pendens* form אלקכון ושכינתיה rather than verse 3's phrase with the copulative (אלקכון ושכינתיה). In light of the prevalence of this sort of disjunct between the number of a subject and that of its verb in the biblical Aramaic that Pseudo-Jonathan may imitate, however, it is not necessary to view ושכינתיה as a gloss. Furthermore, even if we were to view ושכינתיה in verse 3 as a gloss, the presence of the copulative still renders it parallel to אלקכון rather than owned by it. In that case, it is the glossator rather than the older text that suggests the fluidity reading, but this distinction is immaterial for our purposes; either way, we find an ancient Jewish scribe inscribing the notion of divine fluidity into the motif of *shekhinah*.

22. Already medieval Jewish philosophers debate whether the *shekhinah* is identical with God or a created being; see Urbach, *Sages*, 40–1 (for a similar debate in kabbalistic circles, see Idel, *Kabbalah*, 141–4). To some degree, the debate becomes moot when one contextualizes the rabbinic portrayals of the *shekhinah* in the ancient Near Eastern fluidity traditions, in which a deity can have manifestations that are in some way separate but do not impugn the deity's unity.
23. Further, Lorberbaum argues that for the school of Rabbi Akiva (but not for the school of Eliezer) every human body is also to some extent a divine body; see Lorberbaum, *Image, passim*, and see the summary of the relevant ideas on 19–26. If this is the case, then rabbinic literature picks up the tradition of multiple embodiment in an especially original and fascinating manner. On the other hand, I am not convinced that the Akivan sages believed the human body to be a literal case of divine embodiment as opposed to an imitation or reflection of the divine body; see my discussion of Lorberbaum's thesis in [Chapter 1](#) n.126.
24. See briefly Scholem, *Major Trends*, 67–70.
25. On the attribution of this verse to E and source critical divisions in this section of Exodus 23, see my remarks in [Chapter 2](#), n.104.
26. On the title "little Yhwh" and its exegetical locus, see Cohen, *Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy*, 132–3. On the identification of Yhwh and Metatron, see 158–9 and references there.
27. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 138–40; the quoted phrasing is from p. 139.
28. The parallel to the Indian idea of the avatar suggests itself, especially because several of the ten avatars of the god Vishnu were in fact worshipped on their own – indeed, some devotees of Krishna came to see them as deities in their own right, and Vishnu as no more than an avatar of Krishna (rather than the other way around). See Hardy, "Kṛṣṇaism," 387–92, and cf. Kinsley, "Avatāra," 15, and Hawley, "Kṛṣṇa," 384–5.

29. Tishby, *Wisdom*, 3:1283–4. My thanks for a helpful explanation of Tishby’s notes go to Moshe Idel, who, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, was walking past my office at the Hartman Institute (whose door I had, uncharacteristically, left open) just as I was puzzling over these lines.
30. From Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah*, 6, quoted and translated in Idel, *Kabbalah*, 137. The bracketed material is Idel’s.
31. See Wolfson, *Speculum*, 98–105.
32. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 128–36, and Wolfson, *Speculum*, 363–87.
33. To be sure, the best testimony for the presence of *maṣṣebot* and *asherot* standing alongside each other in temples occurs in Phoenician and Canaanite rather than from Israelite evidence; see my earlier discussion on pp. 46–7 above. Some Israelite evidence may exist as well from Lachish, as I point out in n.44 in Chapter 2. The frequent pairing of these terms in biblical texts (e.g., Exodus 34.13, Deuteronomy 15.21–2, 1 Kings 14.23, 2 Kings 17.10, 2 Chronicles 31.1) also points in this direction.
34. For a different understanding of the correspondence between Zoharic theosophy and the Israelite religion found in the Kuniliet Ajrud inscriptions, see Weinfeld, “Feminine,” 350, and Dever, *Did God*, 301–3.
35. For an especially helpful description of these divine forms and their interactions in Lurianic kabbalah, see Magid, *From Metaphysics*, Preface (“The Lurianic Myth”).
36. It will thus be seen that this book, in very broad terms, represents an attempt to support Moshe Idel’s project of demonstrating the antiquity of classical kabbalistic thought; on this project, see especially Idel, *Kabbalah*, 112–72. The evidence I adduce suggests that in broad ways core aspects of kabbalistic thought go back to ancient Israel itself. My argument, it must be stressed, involves not the sorts of specifics discussed by Idel (e.g., the presence of a ten-part anthropomorphical decad in the time of the rabbis and in classical kabbalah), but is much more broad, involving a basic theological intuition underlying both the fluidity model in the Hebrew Bible and kabbalah.
37. See, for example, the quotation from Ambrose in Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50*, 61.
38. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, 190–5.
39. See my discussion, pp. 40–41.
40. Augustine, *Trinity*, 112. Augustine treatment occurs in Book II, chapter 4 (=Book II, chapter 10 in some editions).
41. *Ibid.*, 111.
42. On the subtle nature of Augustine’s claim, see the helpful note in Augustine, *Trinity*, 125 n.44. Luther explains that the text is not a proof or even an example of the doctrine of the trinity but a rhetorical adornment that points toward that doctrine and helps one understand it. See Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, 194–5.
43. For this phrasing, see LaCogna, “Trinity,” 54.
44. On the absence of the doctrine of the trinity in the New Testament itself, see *Ibid.*, 54.
45. Mann, *Mark*, 200, points out that εἰς is to be retained in Mark as a *lectio difficilior*. Indeed, one wonders whether it may not be the more original reading in the synoptic tradition altogether, as opposed to the smoother reading found in the other Gospels.
46. In the synoptic Gospels, we may detect a move to differentiate between the two beings, because God in heaven goes on in the next verse to call Jesus his son. The fact of the overlap, mediated by the spirit, remains apparent. To be sure, there are other ways to understand the descent of the spirit in these verses (for a review and critique, see, e.g., Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 480–2); the value of recovering the fluidity tradition lies in its ability to raise the possibility I suggest here.

47. Of course, to say that this tradition describes the overlap of God with Jesus is not to say that the Gospels intend to report the tradition that way. What each Gospel does with this older tradition is another issue that must be treated separately. Thus many readings of the transfiguration in its various tradition-historical, textual, and redactional contexts are possible; for examples of these, see the review in Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 795–7.
48. It does recall, on the other hand, the notion from early Jewish mystical texts discussed earlier, p. 128, according to which the human being Enoch, transformed into Metatron in heaven, overlapped with part of God to become a little Yhwh.
49. A further parallel with the fluidity traditions as they appear in Canaan involves the idea of a god's "face" (*panim*) as a feminine hypostasis, that worshippers were able to approach more readily than the god in his male fullness; see my discussion in [Chapter 1](#), pp. 26–27. As my colleague Richard Kieckhefer pointed out to me, "It's hard for a medievalist to read this passage without thinking of the way Mary was viewed and approached in later medieval devotion."
- 49a. See Greenberg, "Bible Interpretation," 422–3. Similarly, Maimonides cites Deuteronomy more than any book other than Genesis in his *Guide*. He cites Genesis roughly as often as Deuteronomy in the *Guide*, but in a great many of those cases, the purpose of the citation is to explain away Genesis' many anthropomorphisms, whereas he cites Deuteronomy for more positive reasons. See the indexes in Maimonides, *Guide*, 646–54.
50. So already Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 85–6. An analogous suggestion is made by Gordon Tucker, who suggests quite rightly that in rabbinic terms P is Akivan whereas D is Ishmaelian; see his comment in Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 98 n.[13].
51. G. Ernest Wright, "God Amidst," 73–6; for the phrase quoted, see p. 76. On p. 73, Wright hints at a more specific reading, in which the Congregational form of Protestant Christianity is the true biblical religion.
52. *Ibid.*, 73–4.
53. See earlier, pp. 100–101.
54. See the balanced treatment of this contrast in Kieckhefer, *Theology*, 119–20.
55. Tillich, *Art*, 215, quoted in Kieckhefer, *Theology*, 120.
56. Thus it is significant that for all the many similarities among the prophetic call narratives in Exodus 3–4, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, and Ezekiel 1–3 (on which see Habel, "Form and Significance"), the call of Jeremiah stands out: For Jeremiah, the most deuteronomic of prophets, lacks any vision of God. Jeremiah hears and (in verse 9) feels God, but unlike Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, he does not see God. In light of this distinction, it is not surprising that Jeremiah's (iconoclastic, Protestant) attack in Jeremiah 7 and 26 on those who love the temple building too much can be read as an implicit attack on Isaiah and Psalms, which uphold the doctrine of Zion's inviolability. Jeremiah, like Deuteronomy, does not believe in sacred space, whereas Isaiah and Psalms do.
57. On the notion that D is Protestant and P Catholic, cf. an analogous suggestion in Brueggemann, *Theology*, 673: "The Priestly trajectory is what one might call 'high church,' and leads in a visual, artistic direction that is open to and ready to receive many cultural expressions. The Deuteronomic trajectory, by contrast, is 'low church,' depending primarily on utterances, and issues in a 'theology of the word' as is evident in 'sermons' in the Deuteronomic history, and it tends in a separatist direction."
58. Wright attempts to avoid this conclusion by adopting the position of Frank Moore Cross, according to whom P regards God only as "tabernacling" or dwelling briefly on earth, which somehow constitutes something less than real presence; see G. Ernest Wright, "God Amidst," 71–2. However, Cross's approach to this issue does not recommend

itself; see my lengthy discussions in [Chapter 3](#) n.93, and in [Chapter 4](#), starting at pp. 96–7. In the end, for all my respect for Wright’s scholarship and honesty, and for all my profound admiration for Cross’s stunningly wide learning and deep analytic ability, I cannot escape the conclusion that their interpretation of the verb פִּדְיוֹן is an attempt to convert P into a Protestant – when in Christian terms, P is clearly Catholic.

59. For a popular but informed example, see the discussion in Weiss-Rosmarin, *Judaism and Christianity*, 15–29. An especially lively example of a maverick Jew wrestling with the notions of trinity and incarnation can be found in Bloom, *Jesus*, 96–109, 148.
60. See also Wolfson, *Speculum*, 395: “The commonplace view (greatly enhanced by the medieval philosophical reinterpretations of Israelite religion and rabbinic Judaism) that sharply contrasts Judaism and Christianity should not mislead us into thinking that within Judaism there has not been a tendency toward an incarnational theology. On the contrary, fragmentary theological pronouncements in classical rabbinic literature, building on the morphological evidence in the biblical canon, stand as testimony that a central component in the religious phenomenology of the rabbis was the belief that God did appear in the image of an anthropos at specific moments in Israel’s sacred history.”
61. See Muffs, *Personhood*, 58–9 and 169, for an analogous attempt to point out the deeply Jewish nature of certain aspects of Christianity, aspects that most Jews want to regard as foreign to them. Cf. the comment of Wyschogrod, *Body*, xvii: “The temptation here is to make the contrast [between Judaism and Christianity] as sharp as possible, thereby, at times, distorting Judaism. I have attempted to avoid this temptation. The incarnational direction of my thinking became possible for me only after I succeeded from freeing myself from the need to be as different from Christianity as possible. I am now convinced that a renewed, non-Maimonidean Judaism constitutes a return to origins in the deepest Jewish sense.” See also his comment in Wyschogrod, “Incarnation,” 178. See further his carefully reasoned argument that Jews can disagree with the doctrines of incarnation and trinity without completely rejecting the understanding of divinity that underlies them, in Wyschogrod, “Jewish View,” 157–60, and Wyschogrod, “Why Was,” 215–16.
62. On this crucial difference, see Bloom, *Jesus*, 6–7. To be sure, the category of dying-and-rising god has been vastly exaggerated in scholarship, both by biblicists and comparative religionists, as two (distinct, nonoverlapping) Smiths have shown; see J. Z. Smith, “Dying,” and Mark Smith, *Origins*, 105–20. (Concerning the mistaken notion that Marduk died and came back to life, see also Frymer-Kensky, “Tribulations.”) Nevertheless, the conclusion that scholars have discovered this notion too often does not mean that it never can be discovered at all. We can confirm the existence of a literary motif of the death and return of Dumuzi, of Inanna/Ishtar, and of Baal. (Concerning Baal, see especially the discussion of Mark Smith, *Origins*, 120–30.) Thus Israel’s rejection of this motif remains clear, even if we should note with the Smiths that the motif was less prominent in the ancient Near East than many scholars have suggested.
63. Cf. Wyschogrod, *Body*, 138: “While Christianity speaks of incarnation, the very fact that such an expression came into use implies the presupposition that we are dealing with a being that is initially not material but became so at a certain time, a fact that is understood to be the justifiable ground for the deepest wonder.”
64. In light of this distinction, we should emend Wolfson’s description of Jewish notions of incarnation (quoted in n.60) to reflect the more radical Jewish notion of divine embodiment. Similarly, Wyschogrod, “Incarnation,” 168, understates the argument

considerably when, discussing biblical and rabbinic ideas of God's indwelling in the tabernacle, the temple, and the people Israel, he writes, "I detect a certain diluted incarnation in these ideas."

65. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 3.
66. See, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:217–8.
67. Cf. Muffs, *Personhood*, 50, who reminds readers that P, in contrast to its reputation for "hieratical dryness," in fact "places great emphasis on the inner, the psychological, and the emotional."
68. On the tendency of some Israelites to equate Yhwh and Baal or to view Yhwh as a baal-god, see Bade, "Monoyhwhismus," 84; Wolff, *Hosea*, 49–50; Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 191; Tigay, "Israelite Religion," 163; John Day, "Baal," 3:548.
69. Wyschogrod, *Body*, 65–6.
70. *Ibid.*, 222–3.
71. See especially his classic statement of this thesis in Milgrom, "Israel's."
72. See p. 95.
73. The question becomes more complex in rabbinic texts, because the rabbis debate whether the *shekhinah* ever left the Temple Mount at all, with some rabbis arguing that the *shekhinah* remains there (or abides, more specifically, at the Western Wall); for references, see Urbach, *Sages*, 57 and notes. This view would seem to contradict both Ezekiel's description of the *kabod's* exit from the Mount and also the view expressed in b. *Yoma* 21b. On the other hand, if we could understand these passages to speak of a fluid notion of *shekhinah*, at least the contradiction with Ezekiel could be solved: God must have left in some substantial way while a/the *shekhinah* remained.
74. For a lengthier defense of this claim, see the Appendix. For a defense of the term "monotheism" in relation to J, see especially my discussions of work by Zenger, "Jhwistischen Werk," in nn.110 and 126 in the Appendix.
75. Muffs, *Personhood*, 56. Muffs cites both his own book, Muffs, *Love*, 5–6, in this regard, as well as the very important statements in Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 170, and Geller, "God of the Covenant," 273–319.
76. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:25–9, expresses the view, typical in biblical scholarship, that J is more anthropomorphic than P. In one sense, this view is precisely backward. For J, God is radically different from humanity, because His bodies and selves function in a manner utterly unlike the body or self of a human. For P and D, on the other hand, God's body is more similar to that of a human in that the laws of the conservation of matter and energy apply to it.
77. Scarry, *Body*, 207.
78. It follows that Heschel's God of pathos (on which see especially Heschel, *God in Search* and Heschel, *Prophets*, 2:1–58) must be an embodied God. Further, it is no coincidence that in order to allow for the most intense sort of suffering God, Christianity emphasizes the notion of embodiment as well; the passion occurs specifically to the manifestation of God in a human body. See Janowski, "Ich will," 193. On the connection between pathos and incarnation in the New Testament, see the very significant remarks of Brueggemann, *Theology*, 302, who recognizes that this connection has roots in the Hebrew Bible itself; in light of the present work, Brueggemann's tentative suggestion should be phrased even more strongly.
79. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 110. See also the similar point of Harvey, "Question," 63–9. Of course, Maimonides' position would entail either a radical rereading of most

rabbinic literature or the frank admission that the rabbis and medieval authorities were not monotheists, as noted already by Abraham of Posquières (in his glosses on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Hammadda'*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3.7), on which see Harvey, 69–74. An even stronger Jewish critique of this aspect of Maimonides' system appears in Wyschogrod, *Body*, xiv–xv, who rejects Maimonides' thought in this regard as simply non-Jewish.

80. A more linguistic aspect of Maimonides' critique remains a relevant critique of the fluidity model: to wit, his assertion that “to predicate a positive attribute to God is a violation of God's simple unity, because it assumes a complexity of a subject and his predicate, a complexity of substance and attribute or substance and accident” (as Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 110, summarize it). On the other hand, as Halbertal and Margalit go on to note (110), this view “leads Maimonides to the exclusion of the possibility of any linguistic description of God.” Thus the linguistic critique of theological talk in general is in no way specific to the fluidity model, but applies, I think, to all human religions and religiosity except as practiced by the rarest of philosophical virtuosi.
81. Mark Smith, *Origins*, 93.
82. The opening line of the poem, “Patmos,” in Hölderlin, 2 vols., 173.
83. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 102. See the similar reflections in Bloom, *Jesus*, 131.
84. Similarly, we saw at the end of [Chapter 1](#) that the gods of archaic and classical Greece had nonfluid selves and only a single body, but this did not render the religion of the Greeks monotheistic.
85. Cf. the comment of Wyschogrod, *Body*, 101: “If it is man as man who is to have a relation to Hashem, if man is not to cease being man in spite of this relation, then Hashem must be able to enter space and to be near man wherever he is. And not only near man but in man, or more specifically, in the people of Israel.” See also the statement of Moshe Greenberg in a somewhat different context, discussing the dialogue between God and humanity: “The first condition of such dialogue is God's willingness to adjust himself to the capacities of men, to take into consideration and make concessions to human frailty” (Greenberg, *Understanding*, 93–4).

APPENDIX: MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

1. In regard to bibliography concerning monotheism and polytheism in ancient Israel, see Ecclesiastes 12.12. In this note and the notes that follow I cite only a few representative examples of the positions at hand. For the view that pre-exilic Israelite religion was not monotheistic, see, for example, Bade, “Monoyhwhwismus”; Fohrer, *History*, 172; Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, 42; Morton Smith, “Common Theology,” 147; Zevit, *Religions*, esp. 648–52, 668–78, 690; Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, e.g., 215–18, 274–5, 279; Dever, *Did God*, 294–7.
2. On the question of El's differentiation from Yhwh, see especially Mark Smith, *Origins*, 48–9, 140–3, 155–7. See also Albertz, *History*, 1:76–9 (and cf. 1:97), who argues that El and Yhwh were the gods of two separate groups of what came to be known as Israelites at the very beginning of the Iron Age; as these two groups merged as early as the twelfth century, so did their gods. For the opposite argument (to wit, that Yhwh was originally an epithet of El and that the deity known by this epithet emerged as distinct in Israel), see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 65–75.

3. See, e.g., Stolz, "Monotheismus," 178–82, and Vorländer, "Monotheismus," 84–113, esp. 93 (Vorländer claims that both the event of the exile and the alleged exposure to Zoroastrianism engendered Israelite monotheism; on the latter, see especially 103–6). A variation on this idea is found in Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt," esp. 131–49, who argues that true monotheism first emerges in exilic passages in the Book of Deuteronomy.
4. Mark Smith, *Early*, 152; Mark Smith, *Origins*, 149–94; Dever, *Did God*, 287 (contradicting the view he presents on 295).
5. E.g., Albright, *From Stone Age*, 157–72, esp. 171–2; Barr, "Problem"; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:221, 224–5; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1.203–11 (who recognizes that monotheism developed slowly out of monolatry in the preexilic period and that we cannot pinpoint any one moment at which monolatry gave way to monotheism); Halpern, "Brisker"; Petersen, "Israel"; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 83–107; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 277–81, 323–49, 354–67 (concerning which see further the references in n.21 in this chapter); Schenker, "Monothéisme," 447–8; Miller, "Absence," 202–3, who argues that Yhwh had absorbed the powers of all other deities at an early point in Israelite history, even though worship of deities other than Yhwh persisted. Lohfink, "Zur Geschichte," 22–5, acknowledges that "theoretical monotheism" or strict monotheism appears only in the exilic era, but argues that an exclusive focus on one God, under whom all other heavenly beings are anonymously subservient, appears already in the period of the monarchy and perhaps before. As we see later, this latter sort of belief can sensibly be termed monotheism, and in fact there is little evidence that what Lohfink calls "theoretical monotheism" existed even in the exile or in most forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to this day.

Of particular interest is Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:221–685, esp. 255–85, which receives particular attention in what follows (on critics of Kaufmann, see especially nn.90, 106, and 125 later). It is worth comparing Kaufmann's massive and original treatment of this issue with Albertz, *History*, esp. 1:62–4, 150. Like Kaufmann, Albertz emphasizes that the exclusivity of the relationship with Yhwh stems from the earliest periods of Israel's existence, before it settled in Canaan, and that widespread polytheism was a development of the later monarchic period, especially prominent in royal and upper-class circles. It is fascinating to note the similarity of Albertz's understanding of this issue to Kaufmann's (whose work, stunningly, Albertz never cites). Both see an ancient norm of worshipping Yhwh exclusively, which deteriorated especially among the upper classes in monarchic times. The two share another characteristic: Both these historians of Israelite religion engage in projects that, in their grand scope and their intense focus on a particular issue, are very close to biblical theology. (On Albertz's connection to biblical theology, see his own comments in 1:12, 17; Albertz, "Religionsgeschichte Israels statt Theologie"; and Barton, "Alttestamentliche Theologie." On Kaufmann's role as a biblical theologian, see Sommer, "Dialogical," §1a, and Schweid, "Biblical Critic.") Nevertheless, differences are also evident, especially because Albertz recognizes complexities and ambiguities that Kaufmann does not address. Albertz notes that the identity of Yhwh with the god worshipped in family piety was not always a given; the deity of family piety was not necessarily distinguished from Yhwh, but the average Israelite did not necessarily pause to identify the family deity with Yhwh either (see Albertz, 1:95–9, 187). Albertz's work provides an outline of a more nuanced version of Kaufmann's thesis regarding monotheism. For this reason, it is deeply unfortunate that Albertz never addresses the work of the most important historian of Israelite religion in the twentieth century.

Another scholar who seems to have arrived independently at a definition of monotheism essentially identical to Kaufmann's is Schenker, "Monothéisme"; like Albertz, however, he never mentions Kaufmann.

6. The term בני אלהים / בני אלים can mean "sons of God," "sons of the gods," "sons of [the high god] El," or "members of the class generally known as gods." Linguistically, any of these is legitimate, but the last is most likely.
7. Faur, "Biblical," 14–15. On the worship of angels among Jews, see also Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 9:7=12a.
8. Cf. the astute remark of Propp, "Monotheism," 454–5 n.42: "For the ancient world, functional definitions of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' are more useful than philosophical definitions: 'monotheism' is monotheistic behavior. Apparently, apart from the minds of philosophers and mystics, there is no such thing as monotheism; compare William James's obiter dictum, '[polytheism] has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still today' (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: New American Library, 1958, 396]." The definition I use differs from Propp's (who does not distinguish between monotheism and monolatry), but I find his critique of purist definitions of monotheism quite on target.
9. For this definition, see, e.g., Barr, "Problem"; Petersen, "Israel," 97. So also Faur, "Biblical," 4. Cf. the similar remark of Morton Smith: "Worship of several deities is compatible with monotheism – one has only to believe, for example, that the supreme ('true') deity has created beings inferior to himself but superior to men and has ordained that men should worship them. This belief is expressed in Deut. 4.19 and 32.8" (Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, 165 n.11). See also Schmidt, *Faith*, 379, and Labuschagne, *Incomparability*, 148. Fohrer, *History*, 103, suggests an identical description of Israelite religion, though he does not term such a belief system monotheism; so too Lohfink, "Zur Geschichte," 22–5. This view of biblical religion is hardly a new one. Already the thirteenth-century rabbinic commentator Nachmanides acknowledges that the "other gods" whom Israelites are forbidden to worship include real beings who have real power over other nations (though not over Israel, which constitutes God's personal property). These other beings, Nachmanides explains, are termed "gods" in biblical literature; they are also called "angels." Their power stems from their appointment over specific nations, though at some point Yhwh will depose them and take direct control over the whole earth. See especially Nachmanides' commentary to Exodus 20.3 (to the words, עַל פְּנֵי, especially his discussion of the first sort of idolatry, which is worship of real gods with real, if limited and derivative, power), and also his commentary to Leviticus 18.25. On Nachmanides' understanding of biblical monotheism, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Other Gods."
10. The scholar of African religions E. Bolaju Idowu has termed this sort of monotheism "diffused monotheism"; that is, a type of belief in which God assigns certain tasks to other heavenly beings, whose power or authority comes solely from God. On the applicability of this notion to biblical studies, see Nili Fox, "Concepts," especially 331. Fox's own suggestion (344) that biblical/Israelite religion represents "diffused monolatry" rather than diffused monotheism is marred by two problems. She never explains how the former differs from the latter, and she fails to distinguish between Israelite religion and its subset, biblical religion, mixing evidence from both arenas in a manner that smooths over differences that, we see later, are quite revealing.
11. For a kindred attempt to employ the term "monotheism" in a more flexible way that reflects the realities of lived religions (in particular, those of the ancient Near East),

see the very important work of Schenker, “Monothéisme,” esp. 437. Schenker succeeds in viewing monotheism from within the religious world of the ancient Near East. Consequently, he is sensitive to how monotheism looks as it emerges from the world of polytheism. Schenker’s definition is essentially identical to my own: “Monotheism must not be defined exclusively in terms of being and non-being. It suffices that a god should be of a nature or a degree so different from all other gods that this deity transcends them in a manner analogous to the transcendence of the gods in relation to human beings” (437–8). Schenker sensibly refers to this sort of monotheism as “a monotheism of transcendence which encompasses polytheism” (448): It is a monotheism of transcendence in the sense that the one God is qualitatively different from all other beings, whether heavenly or mundane, and it encompasses polytheism because it acknowledges the existence of other heavenly beings.

12. The discussion of these and other terms in Petersen, “Israel,” is especially helpful. After reading through the secondary literature, in which various terms are used in multiple ways and such terms as “practical monotheism,” “latent monotheism,” and “implicit monolatry” are introduced, one tends to agree with Petersen that “this use of a vocabulary does not appear to have resulted in significant conceptual clarity” (98). This is particularly so in the otherwise helpful essay of Halpern, “Brisker”; he repeatedly makes much of the contrast between monolatry and henotheism, neither of which terms he defines.
13. This circumstance, it must be admitted, points to the wisdom of Propp’s decision to define monotheism on the basis of behavior and therefore not to distinguish between monotheism and monolatry, which I do not do here. See Propp, “Monotheism,” 454–5. See also Nili Fox, “Concepts,” 343, who notes that the difference between radical monolatry and radical monotheism in ancient Israel may have been relevant only to an intellectual and not the average Israelite.
14. The crucial nature of the difference between these two questions is stressed quite helpfully by Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, e.g., 42. The conceptual model provided by Morton Smith is tremendously important, regardless of what flaws might mar his conclusions.
15. It should be noted that I do not employ the terms “elite” and “popular” religion to describe biblical and Israelite religion, respectively; the distinction I draw is a different one entirely – or, to speak more frankly, the distinction I draw is a real one. There is little reason to doubt that the Bible portrays, among other things, popular religion. As William Propp notes, legal and prophetic texts in the Bible support the interests of small farmers or peasants, not wealthy landowners (Propp, “Monotheism,” 548); these texts and also narrative texts are often skeptical of royalty as well. On the limited nature of the elite vs. popular distinction for the study of ancient Israel, see further Propp’s astute comments on 550. This is not to say that such a contrast is never useful; Ugaritic written material, in contrast to biblical material, demonstrably reflects the concerns of an elite group in an urban setting. But the contrast is surprisingly inappropriate when applied to Israelite texts.
16. Dever, *Did God*, 184.
17. Tigay, *You Shall* and, more briefly, Tigay, “Israelite Religion.”
18. Tigay, *You Shall*, 178–80. Cf. Propp, “Monotheism,” 549: “Taking biblical claims of rampant heresy literally is somewhat like envisioning a thriving covenant at Salem, Massachusetts.” For a discussion of the reasons biblical authors overstated the extent of

Israelite polytheism, see especially Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 659–62, 667–72. At least one of the reasons suggested by Kaufmann cannot be correct. Kaufmann argued that the biblical authors were so unfamiliar with real polytheism that they erroneously attributed to polytheists the belief he calls fetishism – that is, the idea that gods and goddesses really were present in idols; indeed, that the gods were the physical objects themselves. Many scholars who criticize Kaufmann note that he overlooked the possibility that the biblical authors engaged in satire in these descriptions. Even more importantly, the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* and *pî pî* texts published after Kaufmann completed his work show that both Kaufmann and the scholars who criticized him were wrong to assume that the biblical descriptions were inaccurate (for a discussion of these Mesopotamian texts, see [Chapter 1](#)). On the basis of these texts, we now know that the biblical authors in fact understood the attitude toward cult statues correctly: The neighbors of the Israelites did believe a deity was present in a *šalmu* – though, as I argue in [Chapter 1](#), they did not believe that the deity was exclusively present in the statue. Thus we now know two things that neither Kaufmann nor his critics knew: (1) Ancient Near Eastern polytheists were not fetishist (because they did not completely identify the god and the statue), though they did regard the god as literally present in the statue. (2) The biblical authors did not think their neighbors were fetishists; rather, they likely understood their neighbors’ ideas about divine presence in a statue and represented it fairly accurately, if mockingly. It should further be noted that Kaufmann’s mistaken idea that the Israelites believed their neighbors to be fetishists is hardly central to Kaufmann’s thesis about the prevalence of Israelite monotheism; it is perfectly possible to reject this specific claim of Kaufmann’s while accepting his larger thesis.

19. Miller, “Absence,” 198 n.2.
20. This finding is in accord with the conclusion of Mettinger, *No Graven*, 145. There Mettinger discusses the Israelite aversion to images in the larger context of Northwest Semitic religions, which displayed similar characteristics, though to a lesser degree, already in the Bronze Age. Consequently, Mettinger concludes, “Israelite aniconism is as old as Israel itself and not a late innovation. The express prohibition of images is just the logical conclusion of a very long development” (145). For a further defense of this thesis, see Mettinger, “Aniconism”; Mettinger, “Conversation”; Hendel, “Aniconism”; and Lewis, “Divine Images.”
21. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, which was first published in German in 1992. I have summarized information especially from Chapters 5–9. On the decline of anthropomorphic representation of deities early in Iron Age Israel, see especially the useful summary in 173–4 (but note exceptions to this tendency, 306–16, 341–9). On monotheism and monolatry, see especially 277–81. On the emergence of greater polytheistic tendencies in the late preexilic period, see 323–49; on a reaction to this development and a greater stress on avoiding any portrayals of the deity, even symbolic ones such as a sun disk, see 354–67. Uehlinger, incidentally, later recanted these conclusions, arguing that preexilic Israelite religion was thoroughly polytheistic; see Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic.” The treatment of the evidence in the earlier work remains the more convincing. See the critique of the later work of Uehlinger in Mettinger, “Conversation,” 278–81.
22. See the similar conclusion in Propp, “Monotheism,” 546–51.
23. Concerning Moabites, Edomites, and Ammonites, we have too little evidence to make any firm conclusions. However, it is perfectly possible that their religions might be

similar to that of ancient Israel: They may have prayed primarily to one particular deity. Cf. Mark Smith, *Early*, 24–6.

24. This helpful classification follows Dever, *Did God*, 176–9.
25. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 164 and 202, and cf. Dever, *Did God*, 176–7.
26. Dever, *Did God*, 177–9. Mazar, *Archaeology*, 501–2, similarly identifies them as goddesses, specifically Ashtoret.
27. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 164–6.
28. So Dever, *Did God*, 179.
29. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 332.
30. See Meyers, *Discovering*, 162, and Dever, *Did God*, 187.
31. For a comprehensive review of these figurines, see Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, with a review of literature in 10–28 and 73–81. For the chronological and geographic distribution of these extremely common figurines, see 40–8.
32. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 333–6. A similar conclusion is reached in Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 76–81, who tentatively identifies the figurine as depicting Asherah for magical purposes. Mazar, *Archaeology*, 501–2, does not distinguish between these figurines and those in the previous category, regarding both as depictions of Ashtoret.
33. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 10.
34. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 328.
35. Dever, *Did God*, 187–8; see the similar conclusion in Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 333. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 77, 80–1, also regards the figurines as having a magical purpose, though, he stresses, one that was likely part of rather than opposed to Yhwhistic religion.
36. Meyers, *Discovering*, 162.
37. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 329. Contrast the clear continuity, albeit with specific areas of innovation, between the naked figurines (from category one) with Late Bronze Canaanite figures; see Keel and Uehlinger, 163.
38. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 159.
39. See James B. Pritchard, *Palestinian*, 83–7.
40. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 159. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 73–4, criticizes the theory that the figurines represent human females, but his criticisms are not convincing. He notes that the heads of the figurines are uniform and lack individuation, a circumstance that “hints that they symbolized the same figure, and not many individual women” (74). But Pritchard, Frymer-Kensky, and Meyers do not argue that each figurine represents a different particular human woman. Rather, they argue that the figurines represent human mothers in general, as a class. Raz further argues that the absence of a prominent pubic area argues against the fertility interpretation, but as Dever has noted, the prominent breasts and absence of a vulva indicate that the figurines represent a nursing mother rather than a pregnant or nubile woman. There are many sorts of fertility, and these figurines direct our attention to what happens after birth, not immediately before pregnancy. Finally, Raz maintains that “seeing the Judean pillar figurines as mortal women cannot constitute a full explanation, since it does not answer the question of what the meaning of such figurines was” (74). This point, however, in no way undermines the identification of the figurines as portraying mortal women; it only reminds us that this identification is only part of a full interpretation. In fact Frymer-Kensky does go on to answer the question of how these human figurines functioned when stating that they are tangible prayer for nourishment. Similarly, the

notion that they are talismans or artifacts used for the purpose of performing sympathetic magic provides precisely the sort of explanation of a human figurine that Raz calls for.

Similarly, van der Toorn, “Israelite Figurines,” 54, rejects the idea that these figurines were amulets, but the only reason he gives for this rejection is the fact that they were found in many different settings, not only in domestic ones. Why their widespread diffusion should somehow argue against the interpretation that they were amulets is not explained. He goes on to argue (59) that they were imitations of cult statues found in temples purchased by pilgrims for use at home or as souvenirs. In fact, the lack of continuity with any known statues of goddesses in the ancient Near East militates against this highly speculative thesis. A further problem with van der Toorn’s discussion is his failure to distinguish clearly among the various sorts of female figurines found in ancient Israelite contexts; he tends to discuss figurines as a homogeneous category, noting in an indiscriminate manner motley characteristics that fit his thesis. Because the three types of figurines are in fact quite distinct in terms of shape, iconography, date, geography, and setting, characteristics of one type cannot be used to argue anything about another type.

41. It is significant that some halachic sources not only condemn magical practice but also need in particular to denounce the use of biblical verses, Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* for magical purposes – a circumstance that demonstrates not only that Jews practiced magic but that they practiced magic as part of what they considered rabbinic Judaism. See Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Sefer Madda*^c, *Hilkhot ‘Abodat Kokhvim* 11.12 and *Sefer Ahabah, Hilkhot Mezuzah* 5.5; Joseph Karo, *Shulhan ‘Arukh Yoreh De’ah* 179.8, 10, 12 and 288.15.
42. On the sin of magic as rebellion, see Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 106.
43. See [Chapter 2](#), with bibliographic references in n.31.
44. For descriptions of the stand and its four registers, see especially Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 157–60; Dever, *Did God*, 151–4, 219–21. The stand was discovered in 1968 in excavations directed by Paul Lapp; see Lapp, “1969 Excavations,” 42–4.
45. Judges 1.27 claims that Ta’anakh was not conquered by Israelites in the earliest stage of Israel’s presence in Canaan (that is, in the thirteenth or twelfth centuries), but both biblical and (independently) archaeological evidence make clear that Ta’anakh was an Israelite site by the tenth century. According to 1 Kings 4.12, Ta’anakh served as an administrative center for Solomon in the eleventh century. On the archaeological evidence, see Mazar, *Archaeology*, 333 (who in fact finds reason to reject the biblical date and dates the Israelite entry to the early Iron Age; on the discontinuity between Late Bronze Canaanite and early Iron Israelite strata there, see also Glock, “Taanach,” 4:1432). Consequently, there is little reason to view the stand as indicative of Canaanite rather than Israelite religious culture (contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 75–7, and Tigay, *You Shall*, 92–3).
46. See the description in Ezekiel 1.5–11. Ezekiel identifies this creature as a כַּרְיֹב in 10.15.
47. For a defense of descriptions of viewing the animal on the fourth level as a horse, see Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 158, and Taylor, *Yhwh*, 30–2 (contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67, esp. n.7, and Lapp, “1969 Excavations,” 44, both of whom view it as a bull).
48. See Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67–71 and 74, and Taylor, *Yhwh*, 28–37.
49. The association of a goddess and a tree flanked by goats who eat its foliage goes back to the late Bronze Age; see Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 56–7, 125–7. For a convincing linkage

- of this sort of tree specifically with Asherah, see especially the brilliant interpretation in Hestrin, “Lachish,” and Hestrin, “Understanding,” and the summary of her work in Dever, *Did God*, 225–8. See Keel and Uehlinger, 72–4, who nevertheless hesitate to make this identification specifically in regard to the Ta’anakh stand.
50. See especially Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67–71; Taylor, *Yhwh*, 28–9; and the very clear summary in Dever, *Did God*, 220–1.
 51. Taylor, *Yhwh*, 29–30, contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 74–7, who attempts to identify this deity as Baal, on the basis of her identification of the animal in the top register as a bull (an identification that is mistaken; see n.47 earlier). A careful review of the evidence by Hadley, *Cult*, 169–76, supports Taylor’s thesis.
 52. Some scholars argue that the Israelite prohibition on making images of Yhwh is a late, seventh-century development. However, T. N. D. Mettinger conclusively demonstrates the antiquity of the aniconic cult (that is, the absence of physical representations of Yhwh in human or animal form) in ancient Israel and to some degree among Northwest Semites generally, though programmatic aniconism in the sense of an absolute rejection of such representations crystallized only among Judeans in the sixth century. See the literatures cited in n.20 in this chapter. In light of this demonstration, Taylor’s reference to the tenth-century hesitation to portray Yhwh physically is well grounded.
 53. On the association of Yhwh with the sun, see Mark Smith, “Near Eastern Background”; Mark Smith, *Early*, 115–24; Janowski, “JHWH und der Sonnengott” (with a extensive review of the secondary literature on 192–9); and especially the comprehensive evaluation of artifactual and textual evidence in Taylor, *Yhwh*, 24–91 and 92–256, respectively.
 54. Nahum Sarna, “Psalm XIX,” argues that Psalm 19 polemicizes against worship of a sun god who is separate from Yhwh – that is, against a form of apostasy. In light of the work of Smith, Janowski, and Taylor cited in the previous note, however, it becomes clear that Psalm 19 argues not against foreign influence or apostasy; rather, it takes issue with the tendency of many Israelites to view Yhwh as the sun god. See further my remarks on the psalm in Sommer, *Psalms 1–30*, §19, and the critique of Sarna in Mark Smith, “Seeing God,” 178 n.28.
 55. See, for example, the eighth-century Judean seal of אשנא עבר אהו (Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 275 illus. 273), in which a sun disk wearing a crown is flanked by *seraphim* or serpents (cf. Isaiah 6.1–7). See also the horse figurines carrying a disk that may be a sun disk (discussed in Keel and Uehlinger, 343–7).
 56. Taylor, *Yhwh*, 33 n.4.
 57. See the classic treatment by Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 44–60. See also the discussion of El’s relation to Yhwh in L’Heureux, *Rank*, 49–70, and Mark Smith, *Origins*, 139–48.
 58. This is also the conclusion of Hadley, *Cult*, 206–9, and of John Day, “Asherah (*JBL* Article),” 392–3.
 59. Consequently, by the narrow definition of monotheism favored by many scholars, this commandment on its own cannot be termed monotheistic, though it is clearly monolatrous – as has often been noted; see, e.g., Müller, “Gott,” 136–7.
 60. On the different meanings of this line in different liturgical contexts, in some of which it attests monotheism, in others polytheism, see the astute observations of Mark Smith, *Origins*, 50.
 61. Labuschagne, *Incomparability*, 34–66. On statements regarding gods’ incomparability, see also Morton Smith, “Common Theology,” 138–40, and Petersen, “Israel,” 96 with further bibliography.

62. See, e.g., the prayers to Ashur in Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:699 and to Marduk in 2:704–5, 726, 727, 729, 737.
63. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:710.
64. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:503. A nearly identical first-millennium version also exists; see 2:503. Similar language appears in the much older Agushaya poem praising Ishtar; see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:83.
65. *Ibid.*, 2:613.
66. Translation by Wolfgang Heimpel, in Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 531. Another translation is found in Jacobsen, *Harps*, 142, who dates the text to the Ur III period. This is a particularly revealing example: The initial lines quoted earlier insist that Nanshe’s power is incomparable, which might lead one to think of her cult as monotheistic, but the next several lines make clear that she is subject to gods more powerful than she, who allotted powers to her.
67. See Gottlieb, “El,” 163. On monolatry in Mesopotamia, see Van Selms, “Temporary,” who demonstrates that worshippers in the ancient Near East sometimes limited themselves to the worship of a single god for a specific time; and see also Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 87–8, and cf. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 62–3.
68. See Morton Smith, “Common Theology,” 139.
69. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:712.
70. Contra, e.g., Halpern, “Brisker,” 88.
71. On the particular similarity between biblical and Babylonian conceptions of Yhwh and Marduk, respectively, as king of the gods, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 51, and cf. the highly perceptive and original insight of Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 244 n.9.
72. The verb Foster translates here as “We bestow upon you” in Akkadian is *niddinka* (from the root *nadānu*), precisely equivalent to the verb כָּבַד (from the Northwest Semitic root כָּבָה), which I translate as “Bestow!” in my quotation from the similar context in Psalm 29.1. For the Akkadian text, see Talon, *Enuma Eliš*, 51.
73. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:371.
74. For further literature relating to this possibility, see n.15 in [Chapter 1](#).
75. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:153.
76. Regarding this question, cf. the useful formulation of Whybray, *Heavenly*, 56.
77. The second-to-last line of Psalm 29 might be seen as confirmation that Yhwh’s rulership belongs to the first of these two models, because Yhwh’s control is described as permanent: “Yhwh was enthroned at the flood, and Yhwh has reigned eternally as king.” But it is possible that the text intends a jussive verb – that is, rather than MT’s יִשָּׁבַח we might read יִשָּׁבַח. This form could be a regular prefix (“Yhwh will reign/Yhwh reigns”) or a short prefix/jussive (“Let Yhwh reign forever”). If the latter, the text uses phrasing that could logically be used of a god who is not all powerful; indeed, this sort of phrasing might even be applied to a mortal king (cf. 1 Kings 1.31).
78. Roth, *Law Collections*, 76.
79. My translation follows the old text preserved in the Septuagint and 4QDeut^b; cf. the related reading in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. See especially the helpful discussion of the issues here and in 32.43 in Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 513–18.
80. On the stereotypical use of the number seventy here and its wider context, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 55, and cf. 48–9.
81. For the concept in Deuteronomy, see also 29.25.

82. On Nachmanides' reading, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Other Gods." Interestingly, Nachmanides arrived at this interpretation even without the text of Deuteronomy 32.9 preserved in the Septuagint and 4QDeut^b⁹ mentioned in n.79 in this chapter; of course, Nachmanides based his reading on the MT, which reads "in accordance with the number of the children of Israel" rather than "in accordance with the number of gods." What was a possible reading for him is even stronger in light of the Septuagint and Qumran texts. For a similar reading of these verses, see Schenker, "Monothéisme," 438–41, who astutely notes that by praying to their own gods, the other nations also give glory to Yhwh, who assigned those gods to them and commanded them to pray to those gods.
83. On *הורה* in the sense of "ruling" (precisely equivalent to the later Hebrew-Aramaic term *פסק*), see also Deuteronomy 17.8–11, Jeremiah 18.18, Haggai 2.11–13, and Malachi 2.7.
84. Hebrew, *התהלך בשם*; I understand this phrase following the LXX translation of *התהלך בשם* as *κατακαυχῆσονται* (from *κατακαυχάομαι* = to boast, be proud of, exult in) in Zechariah 10.12.
85. Further, as Schenker, "Monothéisme," 442, points out, the other gods really exist, but they exist only in some limited time frame, whereas Yhwh alone exists forever.
86. More specifically, they exemplify what E. Bolaju Idowu calls "diffused monotheism" (on which see n.10 in this chapter) and what Adrian Schenker calls "a monotheism of transcendence which encompasses polytheism" (on which see n.11).
87. The same is true of the many passages in the Pentateuch, Kings, and prophetic literature in which Yhwh sends foreign armies to punish Israel. Yhwh assigns roles to other gods, including that of punishing Israel. This becomes explicit in Isaiah 9.5: "Woe to you Ashur, rod of my anger . . ." The word *אשור* here refers not just to Assyria but, quite possibly, to the god Ashur, who serves as Yhwh's *מלאך* – hardly an unusual role for a foreign god.
88. Anu and Enlil appoint Marduk ruler of Babylon and of the whole world in the preface to Hammurapi's law code (Roth, *Law Collections*, 76); similarly, Anu, Enlil, Ea, Belet-ili, and Ninlil acknowledge the sovereignty of Ashur in a seventh-century Assyrian prayer (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:700). But this does not indicate that Anu and Enlil in the former case or Anu, Enlil, Ea, Belet-ili, and Ninlil in the latter are the sole gods worthy of adoration; on the contrary, this act represents their retirement from active duty. Further, neither they nor the new king they appoint goes on to appoint the other gods and goddesses over their respective dominions.
89. The theology found in these passages and others in First Isaiah is highly integrated and self-consistent. The question of whether the text of Isaiah 1–33 dates to the eighth century or later is irrelevant to the point I am making about the integrated monotheistic theology in this textual corpus. My phrasing in the body reflects my judgment that there is no reason to suspect that these chapters contain any material that needs to be dated later than the eighth century, with the possible exception of a few verses here and there as well as chapters 24–27 and a small part of [chapter 14](#). See further my remarks in Sommer, "Is It Good," 322–3 and nn.2–4 there.
90. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:221–85, and cf. 1:286–417. Individual points that Kaufmann makes in arguing for the early dating of biblical monotheism have been critiqued, sometimes justifiably (see n.18 in this chapter). Other issues, such as the place of magic or myth in Israelite religion, have been stated in a more nuanced form. (See in particular Uffenheimer, "Myth," who prefers to speak of "biblical monotheistic myth" [p. 135] and to examine its differences from pagan myth rather than claiming that the Hebrew Bible

lacks myth. A similar approach is found in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 67–107.) Further, one can fault his refusal to acknowledge exceptions to his generalizations and his consequent attempt to interpret crucial evidence in a forced manner. (See for example his treatment of Elephantine [1:679–82], and his discussion of prophecy in Mari in Kaufmann, *Religion*, 215 n.1.)

Nevertheless, Kaufmann's fundamental insight about the real nature of the distinction between polytheism and monotheism (to wit, the relationship between God and the world) and the absence of the former in biblical texts remains compelling. On the validity of Kaufmann's essential claims regarding the distinction between Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern conceptions of divinity, a distinction that involves God's freedom from nature and fate, see especially the comments of Halbertal and Margalit 71–8 and 104. See further Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 5–6 and *passim*; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 107–11. On the critique of Kaufmann in Levenson, *Creation*, see n.106 later. For an eloquent restatement of Kaufmann's approach that is at once deeply sensitive to the Mesopotamian evidence and theologically nuanced, see Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 83–107.

91. See KTU 1.2.i.21–25. The placement of this material in various reconstructions varies. For Pardee's translation, see Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 246b; and see Mark Smith, "The Baal Cycle," 99.
92. On the existence of a heavenly council in the background of the P creation account, see the references in n.64 in [Chapter 3](#).

Some scholars object to the idea that Genesis 1.26 implies a divine council was present at the creation because the idea that God would consult with other divine beings at the creation conflicts with the major thrust of the creation account in Genesis 1, which is that God created the world by Himself (so Cassuto, *Genesis*, 55–6). In fact, God is not described as consulting them but simply as informing them of his decision. Indeed the next verse pointedly states that God created humanity – and whatever beings God addressed in 1.26 have no role. These verses do not portray any group efforts or deliberation. Verse 26 deliberately emphasizes the contrast to the polytheistic (especially Mesopotamian) creation stories that serve as the backdrop and foil for Genesis 1. By alluding in 1.26 to the motif of group action that appears in other creation accounts, the text highlights the absence of the motif more acutely than it would have done by leaving out mention of it altogether. (The same logic underlies the reference in 1.21 to God's creating the *הַתַּיִמִּים* [as opposed to God's fight with Tanin]; it may also underlie the description in 1.9–10 of God's creation of *הַיָּמִים* [as opposed to a fight with Yam], and the reference in 1.2 to God's wind hovering over the impersonal *תְּהוֹמִים* [as opposed to a fight with Tiamit in which winds are wielded against her as a weapon]. For more on this aspect of the rhetoric in Genesis 1, see Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 42–3.) Further, Garr, *Image*, 203–4, points out that in verse 26, God says to the angels, "Let's *עֲשֵׂה* a human," using a less restricted word for creation. But in verse 27 God makes humanity on God's own – and the verb is *בָּרָא* now, a verb used exclusively with the subject God in the Hebrew Bible (as noted already by Melammed, "Linguistic," 1 n.1). Further, Garr points out that though God says "Let's make humanity in *our* image (*בְּצַלְמֵנוּ*)" in 26, God makes the humans "in *His* image (*בְּצַלְמִי*)" in 27. (The last point is also made by Bird, "Male and Female," 144 n.51).

93. On the existence of a divine council in Isaiah 40, see Cross, "The Council of YHWH in Second Isaiah."

94. This sort of differentiation, in which Yhwh is on one side and humans and other gods are on the other, is crucial for any sensible definition of monotheism. On the importance of this sort of differentiation, see also Schenker, “Monothéisme,” 438.
95. On Psalm 8.6, see especially Targum, Radak, and LXX.
96. For this motif, see also Psalms 103.20–22, and 148.1–3, where we find the phrase “angels” rather than “gods.”
97. One might argue that I put too much emphasis on *Enuma Elish* in my reasoning. Saggs rightly points out that *Enuma Elish* “is not necessarily to be taken as incorporating an account of a standard Mesopotamian view of cosmic creation.” Other accounts existed, and not all of them involved conflict among the gods (Saggs, *Encounter*, 62–3). Nonetheless, what is significant in the contrast I draw here is the prevalence of the motif of theomachy among the polytheistic cultures of the ancient Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, as well as the absence of real struggle among divinities in the Hebrew Bible. The consistent pattern that emerges from comparing various Israelite and non-Israelite texts does demonstrate a fundamental theological difference between the Hebrew Bible and its environment.
98. The bibliography is of epic proportions. See especially John Day, *God’s Conflict*, as well as Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 112–44 (and, on the relationship between Baal and Yhwh more generally, 145–94). A helpful review of the main primary texts is provided by Loewenstamm, *Evolution*, 240–57.
99. Cf. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 423. It is possible that in some lost Israelite texts a story with a genuine struggle was once told (see Cassuto, “Epic,” 1:69–109, esp. 80–97), but what concerns me here is the biblical portrayal of Yhwh, not speculation about texts that may once have existed and disappeared. The single biblical exception may be Psalm 82, if one follows the reading suggested by scholars including Mark Smith, *Origins*, 155–7. According to this reading, which is based on the sound judgment that the word אֱלֹהִים in verse 1 stands in place of the tetragrammaton (because the tetragrammaton has usually been replaced with אֱלֹהִים in Psalms 42–83), Yhwh is not the same person as El in this poem. In this case, Psalm 82 describes the rise of the young god Yhwh to supremacy in the council of the older deity El, who is effectively given the role of god emeritus. On the other hand, if Yhwh/*Elohim* in this text is the same individual as El (or if the term עֲדַת אֵל is simply a frozen expression meaning the divine council, as argued by Mullen, *Divine Council*, 230), then another reading is possible, according to which Psalm 82 depicts not Yhwh’s ascent to power but the moment in which the human believer comes to understand Yhwh’s universal dominion. For a sensitive presentation of this reading, see Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” and see the brief presentation of this reading in Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 61–2. Against the sort of reading represented by Smith, see the remarks of Schenker, “Monothéisme,” 443.
100. Similarly, one might object to my argument here by noting that Yhwh fights against other gods in the Exodus story. Indeed, the biblical narrators specifically present the Exodus events as a battle between Israel’s deity and the gods of the Egyptians (Exodus 12.12, 18.11; Numbers 33.4). But the motif of struggle so prominent in the Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts is absent in the Exodus story. The biblical narrative shows that Yhwh had no need to (as it were) break a sweat in defeating the Egyptian gods. The conflict was drawn out over some ten plagues not because the Egyptian gods were successful in slowing Yhwh down, but because God wanted to prolong the Egyptians’ suffering so that His own victory would appear all the more impressive (see Exodus 14.4, 17–18).

101. *Enuma Elish* 2:50.
102. *Atrahasis* 1:167. Rabbinic literature not infrequently portrays God as weeping; see, e.g., b. *Berakhot* 59a, b. *Hagigah* 5b, *Pesiqta deRav Kahana* 15.4. Even in these rabbinic texts, however, God weeps not because God feels threatened by some greater power or because God has been defeated by one, but because God has punished Israel, for whom God retains (in spite of divine anger) abiding love. (On the suffering of God in rabbinic literature, see especially the magnificent collection of sources and discussion in Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 1:68–93, available in English with additional notes in Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 108–26; see also Eyali, “God,” who stresses especially the role of Jewish-Christian polemic in encouraging the rise of these motifs. On divine weeping specifically in rabbinic literature and its connection with ancient Mesopotamian tropes, see the thorough discussion in Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 160–73.) On the limits of monotheistic myth among the rabbis, see further the crucial reservations of Fishbane, 212–13: In the end, creatures remain creatures and God remains in charge.
103. Granted, God can be moved to action by prayer, but this is somewhat different: No threat against Yhwh is made. Even Moses’ demand to be relieved of his job and his life if need be (Numbers 11.20), though a threat, is not a threat directed against the life, safety, or power of Yhwh.
104. See El’s capitulation to Yamm in KTU 1.2.i.30–38 (in Pardee’s translation, Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 246b; in Mark Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” 100–1), and also El’s capitulation to Anat’s threat of violence in KTU 1.3.v.19–29 (Pardee in Hallo and Younger, 254b; Smith in Parker, 105).
105. On the similarities, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 42–61; Mullen, *Divine Council*, 117–20; and Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 42–8.
106. All this is not to deny that some or many Israelites might have imagined Yhwh feeling vulnerable or intimidated as Anshar, Enlil, and El are. There may even be hints of such a view in the Bible here and there. Yhwh does seem to feel threatened by humankind in Genesis 11.6 (an obscure verse in any event), and perhaps in Genesis 6.1–4 (among the most obscure verses in all scripture), Both of these are from J (on J’s tendency to portray Yhwh’s act of creation, and hence Yhwh Himself, as flawed; see Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 37–49). Even these verses, however, do not regard any other force as superior to or mightier than Yhwh. Further, when reading any of the narratives that give a sense that some being or force opposes Yhwh, we need to recall that we are in fact reading a narrative – that is, a text with a plot and hence, by definition, with conflict. If there is to be a monotheistic narrative, it is inevitable that this narrative will give some sense that the one God’s power is limited or at least challenged. As Propp points out, “In any culture, we must distinguish between mythology, where gods’ powers are limited for plot purposes, and cult, where gods are lauded as virtually omnipotent” (Propp, “Monotheism,” 566 n.142).

Levenson, *Creation*, 8–9, argues against Kaufmann’s reading of the passages in which sea creatures fight against Yhwh, pointing out that some of them (in particular Psalm 74.12–17) do not make clear that they describe a revolt rather than a genuine themachy. Nonetheless, the contrast between the biblical passages taken as a whole and the Mesopotamian or Canaanite passages as a whole remains striking. Even in verses such as Genesis 6.1–4, Genesis 11.6, and Psalm 74.12–17, God succeeds in thwarting the will of the other beings permanently, which is much more than Tiamat or even Enlil can say.

Levenson, *Creation, passim*, esp. 11–25, further argues that many biblical passages attest to the biblical belief that God did not in fact vanquish chaos at the outset of creation. Each of his arguments demands attention.

(1) Levenson maintains (11–13) that passages like Isaiah 51.9–11, in which the prophet calls on God’s mighty arm to wake up and defeat chaos as it had done of old, show that those adversarial forces “were not annihilated in perpetuity in primordial times” (12). In fact, however, the adversaries in these passages are not primordial, semidivine monsters but human beings (usually the Babylonians) who have attacked Jerusalem. The existence of the current adversary, then, does not show that the mythic forces of evil still exist; rather, it reflects Yhwh’s sovereign decision to give human beings free will and the power to use it for good and for ill. As we see later, this represents the primary limitation on Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible, but we must note that it is a self-imposed limitation and one that Yhwh can easily thwart if Yhwh so chooses.

(2) In Job 40.25–32, God does not crush Leviathan but imprisons him. “The confinement of chaos,” Levenson points out (17), “rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance.” Here again, however, the persistence of chaos results from Yhwh’s own decision, not from any limitation on Yhwh’s power.

(3) Levenson’s disagreement with Kaufmann is smaller than one might initially think. Levenson acknowledges “the inevitability of the defeat of Yhwh’s adversaries” so that the faithful Yhwhist must “wait patiently and confidently for his master’s reactivation of his infinite power to deliver. The benevolent, world-ordering side of God may be eclipsed for a while, but it can never be uprooted or overthrown” (21). In this case, Levenson’s understanding of the biblical picture of God is ultimately the same as Kaufmann’s, but Levenson describes the theology in a more nuanced way. We might sum up Kaufmann’s view thus: *The biblical God is omnipotent*. We can sum up Levenson’s view thus: *The biblical God can choose to be omnipotent. Indeed, the biblical God chose to be omnipotent at creation, and biblical authors are confident that one day God will choose to be omnipotent again. Meanwhile, they acknowledge that they live in a deeply imperfect world*. Levenson’s reading of the biblical material is influenced by certain strands of rabbinic and kabbalist thought (concerning which see n.102 earlier) and also by the reality of the world we inhabit; it is also a more accurate and subtle description of biblical theology. But ultimately his view of divine omnipotence and Kaufmann’s are congruent.

107. As indicated in n.99 earlier, Mark Smith’s reading of Psalm 82 would belie this claim. On the effects of his reading of Psalm 82 on Kaufmann’s argument, see Levenson, *Creation*, 6–7. On the other hand, the current context in the Hebrew Bible pushes the reader toward the reading found in Tsevat and Levenson, even if Smith’s reading may better reflect the intention of the author of the psalm (and this claim itself is open to question).

108. See, for example, Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 40–60 and 145–94.

109. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 244 n.9.

110. Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 50–1. Significantly, Zenger is speaking here specifically about the J text – which some scholars would point to as a premonotheistic text. His point is equally strong for all other biblical texts that describe Yhwh in terms borrowed from other ancient theologies. Zenger does not apply the term “monotheism” to J, describing it rather as “unpolemically monolatrous” (53). He regards later expansions

- of J (which are largely identical with what classical source critics call E) as “polemically monolatrous” and dates true monotheism to the sixth century. The reasoning behind this use of terms, apparently, rests on several assumptions: One is that ideas evolve in a straightforward and largely unidirectional manner, so that texts that come after J must be more advanced, and true monotheism can emerge only at the end of a long process that scholars must reconstruct. The second is that a text can only be termed monotheistic if it specifically denies the existence of other gods; for Zenger, monotheism must always be explicitly polemical. For this reason, he dates true monotheism to the sixth century. In fact, however, a monotheistic text need not deny the existence of other gods, and it is doubtful that sixth-century texts such as Deutero-Isaiah do so. Further, Zenger’s assumption that a monotheistic text must specifically attack polytheism would render a great many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts nonmonotheistic. If we jettison the evolutionary assumption and the extraordinarily narrow definition of monotheism that Zenger employs, we can readily conclude that J is a monotheistic text.
111. See the Laws of Hammurapi, Prologue, i.1–26. For text and translation, see Roth, *Law Collections*, 76.
 112. E.g., Marduk has Enlil-status or authority in the Prologue of the Code of Hammurapi cited in the previous note. For further examples involving Marduk, other gods, and temples, see *CAD*, volume 1, part 2, 150–2 (s.v. *anūtu*), and volume 7, 85–6 (s.v. *illilūtu*).
 113. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:245, 419–22.
 114. These tendencies are found, with various permutations and in differing versions even within one mythological corpus, not only in Greek, Canaanite, and Akkadian but also in Sumerian and Hittite mythology. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 41–2.
 115. So Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 123–4.
 116. On the nature of the divine realm in polytheistic texts as embedded within the material world, see what amounts to a restatement of Kaufmann’s position in Uffenheimer, “Myth,” 141–2. See also Fishbane, “Israel,” esp. 50–7. Cf. Fohrer, *History*, 79, who notes that Yhwh does not act within the cycle of nature to be indistinguishable from it (as is the case, for instance, with Baal and Mot); He can interrupt that cycle.
 117. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:245, 447–8. See also Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 86.
 118. See the *Atrahasis*, Assyrian recension I:iii (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:188; Dalley, *Myths*, 16).
 119. In the last several sentences I follow Saggs, *Encounter*, 131–3, who argues that the Mesopotamian omen literature was at its core nontheistic: The omens did not reveal the will of a god who was communicating with humans; rather, they reflected the extraordinarily complex and interconnected structure of the universe itself. “The omen thus represented not a god’s decision upon a situation but rather a recognized correlation between past and future phenomena. The gods came into the matter only as the divine beings able to intervene to cut the web” (132). In contrast, Bottéro emphasizes the religious and god-centered nature of divination; see Bottéro, *Religion*, 170–85. Bottéro notes that before performing some omens, the human practitioners would beseech the gods, which suggests that gods could inscribe a message into the object utilized for the omen. Saggs argues that these passages are late theistic additions to what was basically a nontheistic literature. He points out that the deities invoked in these occasional passages remain remarkably lacking in specific or personal characteristics. Both Saggs and Bottéro provide intelligent readings of the texts at hand, which result from

- the fact that both understandings of omen literature obtained in various places and times. Nonetheless, the presence of the understanding Saggs demonstrates indicates a fascinating contrast between Mesopotamian polytheism and the religion of biblical texts (though not the religion of all ancient Israelites): At least at times, the powers inherent in matter are thought of as independent of divinity in the former but not the latter.
120. Herodotus, *History* 1.91.1. Translation from Godley, *Herodotus*, 1:117.
 121. Walter F. Otto, *Homeric Gods*, 263–4. See also Guthrie, *Greeks and Their Gods*, 130, and Henrichs, “Moira,” 8:340–3, esp. 342.
 122. In 217, Night gives birth to two females, Fate (Μοίρα) and Doom (Κῆρα); in 211, Night had given birth to two males with similar names, Destiny (Μόρον) and Ruin (Κῆρα).
 123. Walter F. Otto, *Homeric Gods*, 267.
 124. Thus Henrichs can describe Zeus as being at times the “Führer der Moira,” Henrichs, “Moira,” 8:342. See also Lloyd-Jones, *Justice*, 5, who insists that Zeus is in fact stronger than fate, but his attempt to evade the evidence of lines such as *Iliad* 16:439 is not convincing.
 125. In light of the material discussed in this and the previous paragraphs, I cannot agree with the critique of Kaufmann in Mark Smith, *Origins*, 12 and 201 n.70. Smith writes, “There is little, if any, evidence for an independent order having mastery over the deities in either Ugaritic or Mesopotamian mythologies” (12). In fact, the facts Kaufmann emphasizes – the mortality of gods; their youth in comparison with the universe itself; their use of magic, a technology available to humans as well, to effect change in the world – clearly denote the existence of an independent order in both mythologies. Smith’s protest notwithstanding, the realm of the gods in both Ugaritic and Mesopotamian literature is deeply embedded in the world of matter, a circumstance that differs from what we find in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Smith further asserts, “No idea of such an independent order of ‘fate’ exists in ancient Middle Eastern mythologies. Ugaritic lacks a word even approximating this notion, and Akkadian *šimtu*, usually taken to mean ‘fate,’ refers to a ‘determined course’ that can be changed” (12). It is true that the Greek thinkers articulate this idea with reference to the terms Μοῖρα and ἀνάγκη, whereas Akkadian texts do not use *šimtu* in the same way. Nevertheless, in the narrative and ritual contexts described earlier, Akkadian texts make clear the gods’ subservience to forces greater than themselves. The same idea is expressed differently in Greek and Akkadian literature, and this difference of expression is hardly surprising. As a rule, what Greek thinkers state in abstract terms ancient Near Eastern thinkers convey through concrete examples (on this difference, see Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 6; for an Akkadian example, see Geller, “Sound and Word Plays,” 1:63–70, esp. 65–6). Thus the contrast Smith draws merely points to a typical difference between intellectual expression in these cultures, not to the absence of this concept among Babylonian and Assyrian thinkers.
 126. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 247. This is the case not only in parts of the Hebrew Bible usually viewed as monotheistic (e.g., priestly and deuteronomistic literature) but throughout – for example, in J, as noted by Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 41–2, who points out that in J “Yhwh’s ‘opponents’ are not gods but humans or socio-political institutions. J identifies the root of all evil in Genesis 1–11 as humanity’s striving to draw itself away from its dependence on Yhwh as the *primum agens*.” Zenger also points out (p. 40)

- that already in J (as in Deutero-Isaiah, we might add) the sources of evil and chaos are traced back to Yhwh, a circumstance that shows what I would term the monotheistic nature of this source.
127. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 72–3.
 128. *Enuma Elish* 4:60–2; 4:153. Tiamat and her henchman Qingu, too, use spells to fight their foes, less successfully, as it turned out – but these spells gave the gods cause for great fear: see 1:153; 2:39; 4:71–72, 90.
 129. See the similar point in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 106, who rightly note that the Bible regards magic, like the worship of foreign gods, as a form of rebellion. For the biblical authors, both magic and the worship of foreign gods were acts of disloyalty, but they were not necessarily errors – that is, they did not necessarily involve an appeal to nonexistent forces.
 130. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:276.
 131. A similar point appears in Lohfink, “Zur Geschichte,” 25, who notes that in pre-exilic Israelite belief, there were other gods, but biblical texts portray them as nothing more than anonymous members of Yhwh’s court. God’s real partners, Lohfink rightly notes, are human beings, not the insignificant beings who surround Yhwh in heaven. Though Lohfink does not term this belief monotheism, he nevertheless avers, “At the same time, it is indeed an understanding of God that has left typical polytheism behind” (25). See further the similar point in Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 49.
 132. The same is the case for several other cases in which foreign gods are mentioned: Israelite characters in these verses are always addressing foreigners or speaking mockingly. See Propp, “Monotheism,” 553 n.73.
 133. Braulik, “Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt,” 142: “Sun, moon, and stars, and thus the whole heavenly host, were reduced to a merely ordinary (as opposed to sacred) status.”
 134. In a similar vein, Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 180–6, argue quite plausibly that the metaphysical or ideational differences separating many forms of monotheism and polytheism are limited, whereas the real difference between them is a matter of practicalities of worship. See further their comments on the various ways of drawing the boundary between the categories of nonpagan and pagan on 241 and 250.
 135. On the problematic, or at least limited, nature of the category “monotheism” see also Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 58; Mark Smith, *Origins*, 51, 154; and Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, 275. For a supple view of the relation between monotheism and polytheism, see also Schäfer, *Mirror*, 2–3, who regards monotheism and polytheism as poles on a spectrum, along which actual religions manifest themselves in “a wide range of possible combinations and configurations” (2), and who speaks of “movements back and forth between polytheism and varying degrees of monotheism” (3). On the notion of a continuum rather than a strict separation between monotheism and polytheism, see also Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 104.

List of Abbreviations

AJSR	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANET	J. B. Pritchard ed., <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3d. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.
BI	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BM	<i>Beth Miqra</i>
BR	<i>Bible Review</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1956–2006.
CAT	N. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and A. Sanmartín. <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places</i> . Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1995.
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
D	The Deuteronomist (the school or authors responsible for almost all of the Book of Deuteronomy; see Preface and Chapter 3 , note 1.)
Dtr	The editors of the Deuteronomistic history, to wit: the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (see Preface and Chapter 3 , note 1)
E	The Elohist source in the Pentateuch (see Preface)
ErIsr	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
GKC	W. Gesenius and E. Kautzsch. <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910.
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HS	The Holiness School (which is responsible for the later set of texts in the P source; see Chapter 3 , note 1)
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
J	The Yhwhist source in the Pentateuch (see Preface)
JE	The text containing the J and E sources in the Pentateuch (see Preface)
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBTh	<i>Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie</i>
JM	P. Joüon and T. Muraoka. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . 2 vols. Rome, 1991.

JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JRitSt	<i>Journal of Ritual Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
K	Keilschrifttext
KAI	H. Donner, and W. Röllig. <i>Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften</i> . 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973–9.
KJV	King James Version (1611)
KTU	Cuneiform alphabetical texts from Ugarit, numbered according to M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places</i> . Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1995 (=CAT).
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society translation (<i>Tanakh. A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> . Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible (New York: Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.)
P	The Priestly source in the Pentateuch (see Preface)
PT	The Priestly Torah (the earlier set of texts in the P source; see Chapter 3 , note 1)
RA	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RS	Ras Shamra (excavation number)
RSV	Revised Standard Version Bible (New York: Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1952.)
TA	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VAT	Vorderasiatische Abteilung Tontafel. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum Supplements</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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