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978-0-521-51872-7 - The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel

Benjamin D. Sommer

Excerpt

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

**T**HE 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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>3</sup> 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.*

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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.<sup>4</sup> "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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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

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 it<sup>8</sup>: An ancient Israelite editor crafted this chapter by collecting originally independent texts in order to pose a debate concerning a single theme.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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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.<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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,

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criticized on many points.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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."<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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."<sup>24</sup>

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

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power, authority, and sovereignty that must be established in struggle, exercised in authority, and conceded either by willing adherents or by defeated resisters.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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 הַקֹּדְשִׁים; 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.<sup>29</sup>

Precisely the same approach is found in Rimon Kasher's detailed study of anthropomorphism in the Book of Ezekiel.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> And yet,

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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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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?<sup>36</sup> 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

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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.<sup>37</sup>

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 הַכְּבוֹד).<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> (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.<sup>41</sup>) 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.<sup>42</sup>

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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.<sup>43</sup> 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.’”<sup>44</sup> Other biblical scholars have also acknowledged what many of their colleagues evade: that the biblical God is a physical being.<sup>45</sup>

#### 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