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978-0-521-51872-7 - 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.

Benjamin D. Sommer is Professor in the Department of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He was previously the Director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University. Dr. Sommer serves as the editor of the Psalms volumes of the Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary Series and is writing the first volume of that five-volume set. His first book, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (1998), was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Jewish Research.

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BENJAMIN D. SOMMER

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America



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לֵאשְׁתִּי הָאֲהוּבָה
חַנָּה בַּת אֲבִרָהָם וְשָׂרָה
אֲשֶׁת־חַן תְּתַמֵּךְ כְּבוֹד

For Jennifer
On our marriage becoming a “bar mitzvah”



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והוא אחד ואין שני
 בלי חבור בלי פרוד
 להמשיל לו להחבירה . . .
 גדל־כח וגבורה
 (מתוך א־דון עולם, נוסח ע"מ)

כננא דאנון מתיחדין לעלא באחד, אוף הכי איזי אתיחדת לתתא ברוזא 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

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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.

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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 מציין 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.

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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.

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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. הן חן לה.

Benjamin D. Sommer	בנימין דויד זומר
Evanston, Illinois	אבנסטון, אילינוי
August 2008	מנחם אב תשס"ח
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