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Michael Hundley
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Introduction

In the context of the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world where anything from diseases to doorposts could be considered divine, understanding conceptions of the gods is a difficult enterprise. Scholars tend to expect perceptions of ancient gods to conform to modern, especially Western, divine stereotypes. However, ancient and modern ideas of gods do not so easily align. For example, in accord with Christian and Jewish theology, many scholars have assumed that the god of the Bible is invisible and immaterial, despite significant biblical evidence to the contrary.[1] Similarly, many contend that the Hebrew Bible is monotheistic, again in the face of substantial counterevidence.[2] Even when texts from the ANE explicitly refer to certain illnesses like epilepsy as divine, some Assyriologists argue instead that they cannot be "real" gods because they lack personality.[3] All of this calls into question what we mean when we use the term "god."

The following study aims to reframe biblical and other ANE conceptions of god by addressing three guiding questions: What is a god? What is the relationship between gods? How do gods interact with humans? It

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[1] My goal in providing examples is not to denigrate scholars or their scholarship. Standing on the higher ground paved by them and others affords me a view they did not have. All scholars have blind spots, and I imagine some of my own will emerge as scholars engage with this work. On the scholarly focus on an invisible, disembodied biblical god, see the references in the introduction to Sommer 2009.

[2] Recently, scholars have redefined monotheism so that their use of the term is more in keeping with the biblical evidence. See the Disclaimers and Clarifications section of this introduction for further comment.

[3] For example, Stol 1993:6.

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attempts to answer these questions in Mesopotamia, Hittite Anatolia, Egypt, the Levant, and the non-Priestly (non-P) texts in Genesis and Exodus.[4]

With talking snakes, human-divine mating, and the mysterious overlap of the biblical god Yahweh with his angels, the biblical texts under investigation have been labeled primitive. So too have the ANE texts.[5] However, these texts exhibit logic and sophistication that can only be unlocked by situating them alongside each other. While foreign, the various ANE regions and cultures have sophisticated and logical views of the divine, which have yet to be fully mined.[6]

This project attempts to alter scholarly and popular conceptions of ancient gods while problematizing (or at least contextualizing) modern conceptions. Informed by aspective theory, communal views of personhood, and the Cognitive Science of Religion (about which see Chapters 1 and 3), it seeks to add precision and texture to our understanding of ANE and biblical gods. Considering the data according to ancient criteria and comparing ancient perspectives provides a more robust picture of each perspective and a richer portrait of the variegated ancient conceptions of the divine. By comparing the biblical data to the wider ANE data, the biblical presentation gains dimensionality. It allows the reader to explore the context from which the Hebrew Bible emerged and to see how it adopts and adapts elements from that context to suit its particular ideological, cultural, and theological agendas.

In order to make the foreign conceptions of deity more understandable, the study applies assorted analogies, many drawn from the business world. It compares the various high gods to one-stop shops like Amazon.com, who compete not by creating new powers or by denying the existence of other gods, but primarily by claiming for themselves other deities' previously exclusive attributes. A good public relations team thus may draw freely from the full repertoire of divine conceptualizations to create new combinations, such that a deity's powers could theoretically expand as far as the human imagination allows. The book also links the relationship between aspects of a single deity to franchises like McDonald's, the relationship between deities with a shared forename or title to associated stores like high-end fashion, and divine overlap to mergers, corporate takeovers, and start-ups. The study considers religious rhetoric in terms of competition, marketing, and public relations. It also compares the diverse aspects of a deity to constellations and their variable presentation to LEGO.

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[4] On the non-P texts and the synthetic nature of ANE summaries, see the Disclaimers and Clarifications section of this introduction.

[5] For example, Milgrom 1991 used ANE analogs as a way of highlighting the biblical sophistication by contrast.

[6] Such a claim does not imply that I have fully mined them, only that I have tried to further probe their depths and that much work remains.

Regarding the Hebrew Bible, while it focuses on a particular corpus, the study aims to contribute to the wider discussion of biblical divine rhetoric, consistent on a macro level across the Pentateuch (see Chapter 10) and much of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, it considers the biblical rhetoric of monolatry, the exclusive worship of a single god without denying the existence of other gods. While the non-P texts are decidedly not monotheistic, the monograph also considers how their monolatry lay the groundwork for later monotheism, emerging in the New Testament yet not fully formed until afterward. In addition, gathering the ANE data in one place and providing them with an interpretative framework allows the reader to apply them to various biblical and other ANE texts and corpora. The ANE sections also consider how the divine presentation varies by genre and context, an analysis that could be fruitful for biblical studies.[7] For example, narratives and prayers tend to treat deities as singular entities, while deities in cultic texts and hymns tend to be presented as a constellation of detachable aspects.

OUTLINE

This book consists of two parts – the first considers the wider ANE conceptions of deity, while the second zooms in on the non-P texts in Genesis and Exodus. Each chapter is largely self-contained, such that it could be read profitably on its own. Nonetheless, the chapters all gain greater meaning when read together. Part I addresses conceptions of and contact with the divine in the ANE, with chapters devoted to Mesopotamia, Hittite Anatolia, Egypt, and the Levant focusing on the period from 1500–500 BCE (Chapters 1–4). A synthesis of the findings follows (Chapter 5). Each identifies the gods and assesses the essential and characteristic qualities of deity. It then considers the relationship between

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[7] Multiple factors including genre and rhetorical purpose influence the presentation of deity. Instead of drawing from multiple genres, scholars have traditionally focused on the narratives at the expense of other genres. More recently, scholars have paid greater attention to treaties and cultic texts yet have paid insufficient attention to the way genre affects divine presentation (for examples from Mesopotamia, in particular, see Chapter 1).

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deities as well as the fluid relationship between a deity and its various aspects, before concluding with human-divine and divine-human communication. In the process, it addresses the aspective or context-specific approach to deity influenced by genre as well as the rhetoric of divine competition and elevation.

Part II begins with a character profile of the main biblical deity Yahweh in non-P Genesis and Exodus, divided according to names, attributes, and manifestations (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 examines the various potentially divine characters in the pericope, concluding with an assessment of the identity and common characteristics of the gods. Chapter 8 sorts the divine sphere, situating Yahweh among the gods, biblical and ANE. Chapter 9 considers divine-human and human-divine communication alongside the ambivalent role of objects in mediating presence. Chapter 10 concludes the volume with comparisons between the biblical portrait in Part II with the wider ANE portrait in Part I, the various components of the non-P perspective (Primeval, Patriarchal, and Exodus narratives), and the non-P perspective with the Priestly (P) and Deuteronomic (D)conceptions.

DISCLAIMERS AND CLARIFICATIONS

While unavoidably convenient, labels carry rhetorical freight. The English word "god" is a prime example. As a word, it is notoriously difficult to define and its use varies based on context. At its core, it labels a genus of beings. However, the criteria for inclusion or exclusion are far from settled. Virtually every world religion past and present including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believes in multiple supernatural beings. How then does one adjudicate between them? Are they all gods or is there only one? The difference between multiple gods with one at the top and only one god with other supernatural subordinates may appear slight yet comes with major implications. In a sense, then, monotheism is a language game.[8]

Rather than impose a definition onto the texts, we let the texts as much as is possible tell us what they believe constitutes a god and who qualifies.[9] The texts before us are resolutely polytheistic – that is, they posit a world with multiple gods. Recognizing the presence of other gods in the Hebrew

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[8] Regarding language games, see classically Wittgenstein 1953.

[9] This study uses the terms "god" and "deity" interchangeably and "divine" as a descriptor of gods or deities.

Bible scholars have attempted to redefine monotheism, originally understood narrowly to indicate the existence of a single god. They consider the biblical texts monotheistic since one being, Yahweh, is on an entirely different plane than others, is supreme while others are subservient, and inspire singular worship.[10]

While not unreasonable, such a definition goes against popular usage and draws too sharp a distinction between monotheism and polytheism, between the religion of Israel and its neighbors. Monolatry (or henotheism), the worship of one god while acknowledging multiple gods, seems more appropriate for the Hebrew Bible and is the term used here. Nonetheless, this study also argues that monotheism becomes appropriate when, drawing on biblical monolatry, later traditions redefine the god category, reassigning all divine beings other than Yahweh to the angel or demon categories.

ANE to is a convenient, though not problem-free label, encompassing the region from modern-day Iraq in the east to Egypt in the south and west, including Mesopotamia, the Levant, Hittite Anatolia, and Egypt. It also carries contextual freight as "east" implies a center.[11] Other geographical orientations and labels are possible, such as "West Asian" or "Eastern Mediterranean." This study opts for the more traditional ANE. It also considers the Hebrew Bible an ANE text, though in places uses ANE as a shorthand to describe those ANE texts that are not biblical.

The labels "Mesopotamia," "Hittite Anatolia," "Egypt," and the "Levant" also are imperfect as they are etic terms applied to regions whose views, cultures, and alliances vary across place and time. Synthetic surveys of each tend to stress homogeneity at the expense of diversity. They are also selective in what they cover, choosing some materials and drawing certain connections at the expense of other materials and connections. Nonetheless, I try to account for some of the diversity and limit the focus to 1500–500 BCE. I believe such a bird's-eye view is helpful to trace the rough contours, especially for comparative purposes (about which see later in this introduction).[12]

Regarding the Hebrew Bible, a label that itself is not without interpretive freight, the study addresses the non-P texts in the Pentateuch.[13]

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[10] See, for example, MacDonald 2012:21–71; Sommer 2009:145–74.

[11] "Middle East" replaced "Near East" in popular but not scholarly parlance as well.

[12] I invite critique from specialists on both the macro and micro levels.

[13] "Hebrew Bible" is not an entirely accurate descriptor as some of it is written in Aramaic. The traditional Christian "Old Testament" implies the superiority of the New Testament

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Pentateuchal scholarship enjoys a relative consensus on the identity and extent of the P texts, at least in Genesis and Exodus.[14] In contrast, scholars have intractably different perspectives on the remaining non-P texts, the two most prominent of which are the source-critical and redactional models.[15] While the texts are no doubt composite and their compositional history is complex, the present study considers the non-P texts as a composite block. It analyzes the varied expressions of deity and leaves the text's prehistory for another day.[16] It is predominantly phenomenological in the sense that it considers the texts' perspectives on religious phenomena, also examining the rhetorical effect the composite text has on the reader, whether intended or not.[17] As such, this study makes no attempt to trace the history of Israelite religion, but rather its rhetoric, which effectively becomes Israelite religion as remembered by posterity. Nonetheless, the results should be of value to those interested in how and when Genesis and Exodus were combined.[18]

In places, I use the label "non-Priestly Pentateuch" to refer to the non-P texts in Genesis and Exodus. This too is not strictly accurate since D also is part of the non-P Pentateuch and the composition of much of the book of Numbers remains open to debate. I use it as a convenient way of distinguishing non-P from P and D within the Pentateuch. The book also demonstrates a preference for Hebrew versification with the English in parentheses when it differs. In addition, I opt to transliterate the Hebrew to make it more accessible to nonspecialists.

This study is comparative in nature. While it attempts to analyze individual texts and traditions on their own terms, it does so with a view toward other analogous ANE texts. Comparing overarching traditions with individual texts (e.g., Mesopotamia with non-P Genesis and Exodus) would produce different results than comparing overarching traditions, individual texts, or individual ANE texts to the biblical tradition. I have chosen to organize it this way since my primary audience is biblical

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("First Testament" is not much better). "Tanakh" (an acronym for its constituent sections according to Jewish interpretation) is another option.

[14] See conveniently, Campbell and O'Brien 1993, based on the classic study of Martin Noth 1972, though cf. Hartenstein and Schmid 2013.

[15] See, for example, Gertz et al., 2016.

[16] That said, it does mention some of the source-critical and redactional divisions as a way of orienting the reader to the wider discussion.

[17] Rather than being mere compilers, I believe that the editors were also authors who considered the import of composite editions (see regarding my stance on compositional issues Hundley 2018).

[18] See, for example, Dozeman and Schmid 2006.

scholars, many of whom do not have sufficient access to the ANE material or to the systems of thought that inform it.[19] As noted, such a synthesis also facilitates comparison with various biblical and other texts and traditions.

In addition, this book aims to make comparisons without value judgments. While similar in multiple and meaningful ways, the non-P Pentateuch is different in others. While this study considers what is exceptional about the biblical portrait, it does not consider the Bible exceptional in the sense of being vastly superior.

Regarding the issue of influence, this study avoids claims of direct dependence. As a teacher of world religions where striking parallels emerge across the globe with no apparent genetic connection, I am leery of dogmatic claims of one text relying on another. In some cases connections between cultures are likely quite close, while in others they are more diffuse (in places these connections are more specifically addressed). Nonetheless, rather than positing a direct connection between texts, ideas from adjacent cultures likely transferred more diffusely (though we as scholars generally only have access to the texts that preserve them). Thus, individual texts inform us of the ideas circulating seemingly in the air.[20]

I also do not want to imply that the biblical (or other ANE) authors merely copy and paste texts from adjacent cultures. While the surrounding cultures undoubtedly influenced each culture's portrait, no culture is a blank slate. Each adapts and combines foreign influences to suit its particular context and agenda. Finally, finishing a monograph in the time of COVID-19 means that in places there is not as much reference to secondary literature as is warranted. As such, I apologize to any authors whose significant works may have been excluded.

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[19] I do hope that it will benefit specialists as well as provide a helpful synthesis and even a helpful analysis of some individual texts and genres. I also have tried to make it accessible for nonspecialists and nonacademics. Its results and implications are clear and broad-ranging enough to be of interest to a wider audience.

[20] The theory of cultural translation clarifies how culture is translated between contexts (Asad 1986; Ghosh 1992). Flynn applied the theory to the Bible generally (2013:73–90) and more particularly to its religious history (2020).