

Abstract

In the introduction to his influential *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, Mark S. Smith reveals a question Victor Hurowitz scribbled in the margin of a draft of an earlier book: “What is an *ilu*?” (The Akkadian word for “god.”) This question serves as the point of departure for this thesis, which seeks to outline the conceptualization of deity within the Hebrew Bible through the lens of cognitive theory. Although the discussion will focus repeatedly on Israel’s divine exemplar, YHWH, the primary insights sought are those related to the category’s boundaries. The goal is not so much a definition as a description of what the authors of the biblical texts considered a god to be.

The first chapter begins with a description of the fields associated with cognitive theory, and particularly cognitive linguistics, which will undergird the majority of the investigation. Chapter 2 examines the cognitive origins of notions of deity and discusses how this heritage is reflected within the biblical texts. Lexical considerations are also weighed in considering the relationship of the Hebrew Bible’s prototypical conceptualizations of deity to the Levant’s more widespread and generic concepts. The third chapter examines the conceptualization of Israel’s prototypical deity, YHWH, from the earliest divine profiles detectable within the text through to the unique and exclusionary imagery developed before and during Israel’s period of exile.

In Chapter 4 the discussion returns to the generic notion of deity, highlighting references within the biblical text to deities other than YHWH and extrapolating what data are available to illuminate the contours and extent of the divine category. Cognitive-linguistic models are then integrated with these data to illustrate the conceptual frameworks responsible for the form and function of deity within the Hebrew Bible. The conclusion synthesizes the different sections of the thesis, sketching the origins and development of the Hebrew Bible’s representation of both prototypical and non-prototypical notions of deity. Implications for further research are then briefly discussed.