

Francesca Stavrakopoulou discusses "God: An Anatomy" with Candida Moss

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Harvard Book Store's virtual event series welcomes FRANCESCA STAVRAKOPOULOU—Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Religions at the University of Exeter—for a discussion of her book God: An Anatomy. She will be joined in conversation with CANDIDA MOSS, the award-winning author of Bible-Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby.

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hello everyone welcome thank you for tuning in on this really chilly friday night my name is audrey stewart and on behalf of harvard bookstore i am so excited to welcome you to tonight's event with francesca savrakopalu discussing her new book god and anatomy she is joined tonight in conversation by candida moss through good times and bad harvard

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conclude with some time for your questions if you have a question at any time during the talk go to the q a button on your screen and we'll get through as many as time allows if you would like to purchase a copy of god and anatomy there will be a link in the chat where you can purchase

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your support especially now and as you may have experienced in virtual gatherings technical

issues may arise if they do we'll do our best to resolve them as quickly as we can thank you in advance for your patience and understanding now i am so excited to introduce tonight's speakers francesca stravacopoulou has been a professor of the hebrew bible

and ancient religion at the university of exeter uk she has worked in television on the bbc and channel 4 presenting shows on the historicity of the bible and the hebrew bible and the role of women in biblical times and the developments of biblical texts including primetime bbc series bible's buried secrets which was broadcasted in the us on

netflix and it's very good she is joined tonight by candida candida moss candida is the edward cadbury professor of theology at the university of birmingham uk and an award-winning author of five books including bible nation the united states of hobby lobby she writes for the daily beast and is a frequent news commentator for cbs and cnn tonight

they are discussing god and anatomy in this fantastic fascinating book francesca looks at how the abrahamic god was not always the mysterious being the bible portrays him to be in this revelatory study francesca presents a vividly corporal image of god a human shaped deity who white he walks and talks and weeps and laughs who eats sleeps feels

and breathes and who is undeniably male the los angeles review of books calls it a tour of force and a triumph and on that note of praise i am so excited to turn things over to our speakers francesca candida thank you so much for joining us the virtual stage is yours hi hi and thank you so much

for having us um i have to agree i thought that this was a fantastic book somewhere between reading like a fascinating collection of essays or in which you can find like the best pieces of information you might want and also just a kind of real page turner with all of these revelations i didn't know about so thank

you so much francesca for writing the book and um i have to start by asking kind of the obvious question i think for anyone who sort of grew up either as a christian or from a kind of christian background the idea of god having a body i think people would hear that and think oh you mean jesus

but that is not what the book is about this is about the body of god and so my first question is you know why write this book and tell me like what is the evidence for god having a body because a lot of people would say well that's just a metaphor yeah well um i wrote the book

because when i first went to university um i really wanted to find out more about the origins of the god that was still worshipped today and i couldn't understand why the gods and goddesses that i loved reading about when i was a kid so the gods of ancient greece and rome and egypt and mesopotamia how they not

survived into the modern day and yet this other god that had been around at the same time had so i went to university and started to study the bible properly i learned hebrew and biblical greek etcetera and and it seems to me that this this was a god that was very much like those deities but none of

my university professors were talking about it they were saying to me oh no it's just a metaphor this language is just poetic um so this is the book that i've been wanting to write for several years um as an academic you know we never get a chance to write exactly what we want to write all the time

we're too busy teaching most of it but i just felt that it was the right time for me to do it and the evidence that we have that he had a body is in the texts themselves this is not simply poetic language or metaphorical language all of that imagery comes from a historical reality in which the original

ancient worshipers of this deity understood that god had a human-shaped body um and this is the language in which they they describe him in the texts yeah and you mixed a compelling case for that in the book like all of the sort of images that you have in the book all the descriptions of statutes of seeing god

face to face i think a lot of people thought well you couldn't do that and i think especially at this moment in history it's important to ask if god has a body what is it like because to look at renaissance art to watch the simpsons the body of god and the simpsons uh he's wearing a white dress

he has a long white beard what is the body of god like in the bible it changes over time so um in the collection of texts that most of the texts are um that are found in what christianity calls the old testament and what in jewish edition is known as tanakh and what scholars tend to refer to

as the hebrew bible in most of those texts god is a relatively kind of virile relatively young strapping warrior like deity who has this kind of black blue hair and this ruddy radiant dazzling skin this kind of emanating radiant light this kind of red hot light coming out from him um but then he changes over time by

the time we get towards some of that later material in the hebrew bible so the book of daniel which is written about the second century bce by this point that that dazzling hot red radiance has gradually shifted to take on a more celestial kind of color more like the color of the stars so it's become a lot

brighter a lot whiter and consequently so has god's hair and his beard so whereas he was once this very kind of good-looking dashing kind of deity um he sort of starts to take on the features of not an elderly god but an ages deity and so the the gray hair or the white hair of wisdom and that

we associate you know with elders in our own communities and uh yeah so that kind of starts the beginning of this shift in visual culture whereby he starts to be imaged as an old white guy with a beard right and we're all really familiar with that but there was so much that you just said that i know

everyone who's listening will be leaning forward to say did she say virile about god and so there's a lot to pick up on that and maybe i'll start with virile and i think when people talk about bodies it automatically invokes and invites questions about things like skin tone and gender and when you say a word like veril

i want to ask you about god's sexual orientation does god have one um and can we hear about it yeah so this is i mean you know the important point that i make throughout the book is that god was not extraordinary in his cultural context this book kind of sets him in his natural habitat in ancient southwest

asia um from the iron age through to the roman period and beyond and uh this was a world in which the gods naturally had human shaped bodies and they were naturally gendered in similar ways to human beings and divine gender was much more elastic and fluid than perhaps was the case for a lot of their human worshipers

and but generally we're talking about aspects of male and female and sort of a spectrum of masculinity and femininity some deities were kind of um third gender it's not a great term but it's a term that's often used to talk about deities who could move between very formal gendered binary gendered roles quite easily but yahweh was very

much in keeping with the majority of um warrior deities in that he was very much male very much masculine um and in this ancient world to be a male to be a warring male was to be hyper hyper masculine and that hyper masculinity was marked by certain sorts of body features um obviously in terms of genitalia uh

this was a deity equipped with male genitalia um but also this was a god who was who was the epitome of cultural constructs of male beauty and that male beauty was this very virile hyper masculine very sexy um kind of dark haired and sort of dark beard i groomed a beautiful groomed beard we're not talking about some

kind of unkempt hairiness we're talking about beautifully groomed um a guy who a god who smelled nice um who was oiled in in spiced perfumes and so yeah when we're talking about that kind of construct of masculinity we're talking about something that's very much within a broadly binary frame and something that's very much on the hyper masculine

end of that frame right and i think everyone here is familiar with sort of hyper masculinity in today's sort of modern world but it's it's interesting to hear that part of that involves sort of

grooming behaviors that today or in other cultures in antiquity or the medieval period might have been gendered as hyper feminine you know oiling

your body doesn't necessarily say hyper masculine but i have to say as i as i was reading your book at several junctures you kind of allude to what might be considered by some people to be sort of human weaknesses of assault like he gets tired he takes naps he doesn't like it when things are too noisy and

he kind of like shushes the heavenly chorus um and he drowns people to shut them up and i'm not like condoning drowning people so they stop talking but this is like enormously relatable to introverts like myself who sometimes just want quiet but it's also really unexpected and for you as you were doing the research on this book

you know this really detailed and highly skilled philological analysis that involves really digging into the archives and the archaeology as well as reading these kind of texts in their original language what jumped out to you what was unexpected to you um i think one of the most unexpected things was the fact that he's so human in all

sorts of ways in terms of his emotional inner life and one of the things that really hadn't i hadn't quite grasped i don't think in kind of particularly when i first started reading these texts as i said when i was a student one thing i hadn't quite grasped was just how intimate a portrait we get i mean

it's a composite portrait drawn across lots of different biblical texts but but how intimate that portrait is in terms of his emotional um his interior life and so you know there are various occasions in in particular in hebrew bible text in which he cries and he weeps and and he talks about this almost like belly pains you

know he kind of suffers i mean in in the ancient world in in southwest asian cultures at least um emotions that the heart wasn't understood to be the seat of of emotion i mean the heart rather was a cognitive organ that's where kind of thought processes and decision-making and those sorts of activities happened but the emotions were

very much located in the belly and the units and in the bowels which you know to a certain extent we understand that you know our minds are very much bound up with with our bowels to a certain extent look at the language that we use you know we feel sick to our stomachs and you know ourselves in

fear i mean so you know this is we still carry that kind of language um that responsiveness in our language today but this is exactly the same about this god yahweh and that he he talks about the way his his innards cause him pain when he's when he's grieving emotionally or when he's making a hard decision i

mean admittedly some of those decisions about am i going to kill these people or not and he doesn't really want to but he kind of has to um but he still grieves and it was that very intimate portrayal of of a god who feels really greatly and i and i found that quite moving in a

funny sort of way yeah it's funny because um in the history of sort of like when does an individual self emerge the individual self um a classicist will tell you emerges when people kind of have that in a dialogue um when they're kind of conflicted about a decision like whether or not to kill people and yet when

we're talking about god people tend to think that that kind of conflict within god god changing god's mind those kinds of things are perceived as sort of an inherent weakness for a deity but a sort of sign of individuality and sort of real personhood in human beings so there's something so relatable about hearing about the kind of

god that you're sketching for us in your book that is not just the god who gets angry the kind of vengeful god that sort of certain kind of anti-semitic tropes sort of tried out about the hebrew bible but it got his sort of grieving and crying but i can't help but want to talk about the image um

and about god's vowels and this is um fable attributed to esop that we now have in modern society about you shouldn't kill the golden goose but in the fable they do kill the golden goose because they're like well if it's laying golden eggs maybe it's innards are also made of gold and so you tell us about this

god that's like this is kind of bronze skin and very human but also not human and certainly not an old white guy and um if i was and you do this autopsy at the end of your book if i was to cut open the body of god what would i find inside him and would anything be missing

yeah and i think yeah we would certainly find the major organs the lungs and the heart and the bowels and the belly and the stomach um i don't think we'd find excrement um i don't think we'd find urine um and we certainly wouldn't find blood this is um the body of god is it's very corporeal and it

and it was understood to be material that the certain sorts of aspects of the cosmos that were otherworldly they weren't immaterial they were understood to have a material quality so even something like the word spirit um in greek pneuma in hebrew it's ruach that tends to be translated that we tend to assume we import these kind of

more modern constructs of spirit and meaning something is immaterial but but these were understood to be to be material substances and properties these sorts of winds and spirits and breaths um so this was a body that was very much human-like but it wasn't human in the sense that it contained blood he couldn't bleed he couldn't um he

couldn't die uh some gods could the god ball who was basically his cousin culturally he died and

rose again three days later um many that hundreds and hundreds of years before the um the jesus stories came around um but yeah this was a god who was whose body contained the major organs in in his torso but didn't

contain some of the messier stuff um although he it probably you would probably find semen but not necessarily excrement or urine that is fascinating no excrement no urine maybe semen no blood but tears yeah definitely because the eyes the eyes that the word in hebrew the word for eyes is the same as the word for a spring

like a spring of water and in some of these ancient cultures and it's very similar um across a lot of ancient southwest asian languages but i mean primarily those that all share a semitic origin but in some of these um cultures like in mesopotamian text you get the idea that the the head was understood to be full

of water it was like almost like a kind of a well or a system full of water so that when you cried it was kind of like this water store kind of leaking out of your eyes and you know we look as i think we always need to be really careful about the way that we talk about

the past i mean i i enjoy talking about about this kind of ancient deity and i do see him very much as an ancient deity and a part of his own cultural context um but these weren't unsophisticated people with unsophisticated ideas about deities it was just simply a different way of being in the world and it was

a different way of thinking about the world and it was a different way of thinking about bodies there were you know human bodies as well as other worldly bodies and there were no less sophisticated than our own it was just different that's all just different yeah that that's really interesting i think one of the things that when

people think about um what would be significant about a divine body is the ways in which you kind of act on people in the present because some of us would look more like that divine body than others yeah um and that would kind of privilege those bodies and one of the things that i think about it my

work is about disability and it's very clear that in the garden of eden god is walking around he walks around all over the place um you have like some really wonderful readings to do with god's feet that i think are fascinating and took me in really unexpected places but at some point in the hebrew bible sort of

it seems like during the exile god sits down in a chariot slash throne and has he gotten up yet and there is a name for a throne that has wheels in it for a chair that has wheels on it it's a wheelchair and i guess my question is on behalf of you know people who maybe don't conform

to like the divine body um you spoke about his hair going white he might be aging is is god still i

i know it sounds almost impossible to talk about an omnipotent being being unable to do something but does god still walk around or does he ride in his wheelchair that's one of the interesting things is that

um his being seated and enthroned it starts from a place in which um so he talks about the jerusalem temple and he says this is the place for the souls of my feet where i should place my faith in my feet and you know this is my place my feet aren't going to move and then the babylonians

you know a few centuries later the babylonians invade destroy the jerusalem temple and in that particular context a context in which um destruction i mean it oh it feels really weird to be talking about this given what's going on at uk and ukraine at the moment um but when a foreign nation invades the thing you do is

you don't just kill and destroy you also um target the cultural heart of a place and you target the things that are most symbolically valuable to people as well as those things that are economically valuable and temples were prime targets for that so even though you fear you know you were you were basically risking these deities in

these temples from you know really playing habit with you and it was still worth the while going into a foreign territory when you were trying to invade or destroy or subjugate it and destroying the temple and then basically kidnapping god mapping the cult statue of the deity and carrying it off into captivity as a prisoner of war

and so this is what people really struggle with so yahweh's worshipers when his temple was destroyed in the 6th century bce they were well god's been godnapped he's been taken captive and so you find a lot of the texts in the bible that are responding to this saying no no he has deliberately done this he has deliberately

abandoned his temple but the thing is the idea of him getting up from his from being enthroned in his temple from walking out was really difficult because it suggests it suggests a mobility that undermines the sense of permanence and security and territoriality that came with this deity he was a patron deity of this of jerusalem um and

so the prophet ezekiel decides that actually yeah his throne has got wheels on it and so you have this image of you know in my head i call it the mobile throne which which makes my british students laugh because obviously but it doesn't really work in you that's because everyone calls them cell phones doesn't work at all

but he has a mobile phone thrown and he kind of wheels himself out of the temple and wheels himself off to babylon so he takes control by means of this wheeled chair or wheeled chariot or throne or whatever he takes control of his own destiny in that way and tries to present himself as a deity

who is who has decided this he has decided that the babylonians are going to destroy his temple and so in that sense i think from a disability's perspective what's so interesting is that it actually renders a wheelchair um a very empowering symbol a very empowering kind of um object or extension of his person um so in that

sentence i've never really thought about it before until you said that but i but i can see that a very sort of positive image for the chair there but on the other hand you know the reason he's sitting down so much is um because yeah he's basically putting his feet up like he's there he's secure he doesn't

need to kind of get up and fight like he used to do yeah and and that sort of leads into my my next question about god um beyond the fact that like i think it is empowering for people to look at a deity and see more of themselves and disability in people with disabilities generally there's not tons

of that in the bible speaking from personal experience there's not a lot of like relating to the divine in one's human frailties but in terms of like god is a warrior um and i think if people are thinking about an embodied deity in the hebrew bible they know that the god who conquers the god who kills the

god who punishes the god who rewards that kind of omnipotent ruler or warrior but at certain moments you kind of show god performing these other tasks like he's sort of a vineyard worker at one point i can't which is a fairly like low status work in the ancient world and this was kind of an unexpected part of

god's cv for me like i didn't know that this was on his resume that that he was um you know in addition to creating the universe also enjoyed you know a tipple um now and then and so and i think again that sort of um it's possible for people to kind of relate to that in certain ways

so what kind of what else um what other internships did god do um other than sort of volunteering at a vineyard i mean the vineyard thing is really interesting because that is a scene it's in isaiah and it's the scene where he basically spots him walking back from edom which is what we now call is

southern jordan basically today and he says oh you know who is this like very glamorous looking warrior striding towards us why are his robes all stained red and he says oh i've been treading you know treading grapes basically i've been in the vineyard um but then obviously he then reveals that it's not grapes that he's been treading

and trampling it's human bodies he's been out fighting um and what's so interesting about that is that yeah the vineyard it was a low status job to a certain extent and a joyous you know is associated with joyous times um but this is something that yahweh does on his own like

normally if you're in a vineyard like

lots of ancient egyptian and mesopotamian images frescoes are showing people trending great so you have to do it in groups it's impossible just to do it on your own but this is a god who can do that so in that sense yeah on his resume he's like i did it all by myself you know he would have

definitely got the job at the local vineyard but then the other things he does i mean he buries moses he works as a he's a multi-worker in the book of deuteronomy and it's a translation that you very rarely see in english bibles and because the way in which the hebrew has been adjusted by later translators who are

uncomfortable with the idea they they've you know the text literally says moses died and you know he's with god and god says right you're going to die now moses drops dead um and then it says and he buried him and it says god buried moses but this is a translation that's often sort of it's been corrected um

by very pious ancient scribes who felt that it was completely improper for god to render himself polluted by means of contact with a corpse even of course you know even moses courts was polluting and so in english translations we read and they buried him and so people just assume it was the ancient israelite tribes that buried moses

so yeah we see we see god as a mortally worker but we also see him as an author i mean this is a god who like enjoys making lists and writing books and obviously writing the ten commandments and writing the torah um so yeah he's got various various jobs on his resume yeah i think i think the

translational issue with the mortuary work is really interesting because you know as you alluded to coming into contact with corpses renders you impure unless unable to go into holy spaces until some period of time or cleansing has elapsed for the greeks and romans mortuary work was done by enslaved workers who sometimes weren't allowed into certain

parts of the city so there's something really powerful about god doing that kind of work and engaging in the kind of work that according to certain parts of the hebrew bible would render you impure to be in god's presence yeah so this is sort of a tension and an irony there yeah but but but also i think

it reflects a particular historical and cultural reality in which you know before the greco-roman period um mortuary work like this tended to be performed by families and so um particularly women actually uh so there's a sense in which there this was a world in which the physical engagement with the dead was much more common and even yahweh

himself um we've got two inscriptions dated from the 8th century bce where it's not just you don't

in tunes you don't just find um appeals to yahweh for blessings but you also find this huge divine hand inscribed into this rock in the tomb as almost as if it's the hand of god coming down to protect the inhabitant

of the team and then the inscription asks yahweh and his wife um to protect the occupant of the tomb you know this was a world in which the dead work and it wasn't so much an afterlife it was more like a post-mortem existence and the dead needed protecting in their tombs from various you know from tomb robbers

from those who had disturbed their bones and from other sort of demonic forces that that might um disturb their their eternal sleep so yeah in in hebrew bible texts um god has much more contact with the dead than perhaps we might assume that is really fascinating and you mentioned something just now that i think will have caught

a lot of people's attention and i already see that it's in the q a so even though it's a little early i have to ask you god in his what ashama oh yeah yeah oh yeah i don't mention that his wife who is that and tell us about her because i think you know everyone wants to know

yeah so um asherah is she was she was one of them the longest lived goddesses across um the southern fact well the whole of the levant but particularly the southern levance and originally she started off as uh the wife of god's dad i'm just like dropping like bombshell off the bomberhead i'm so sorry but yeah um so

in a polytheistic system in which yahweh worshiped emerged uh there was a high god and his consort um the high goddess and her name was in hebrew it's ashura and in other semitic languages it's a theoret and other sort of related terms um but yeah we have inscriptions we have lots of references to ashford and the hebrew

bible normally by as biblical writers saying these idolatrous israelites who who put a statue of ashrae in the temple of yahweh um would plant her cult symbol next to yahweh's altars these are terrible things and you mustn't do these things which obviously implies that people are doing that if you're being told not to do it but then

um yeah in the 1970s and 80s hebrew inscriptions um were found at various locations um including one in the west bank in which it's you know these clear references to yahweh and ashura and now most scholars um would agree that far from being a deviant um or even a foreign canaanite element of of ancient israelite religion the

ashrae was generally held to be the wife and consort of yahweh um yeah but she didn't kind of make it through the shift from polytheism into what scholars term monotheism not a great term it's a very problematic label but what looks to be a single deity system yeah obviously asherah fell by the wayside unfortunately yeah i

mean obviously the idea of that of god having a wife and what that might mean for monotheism we're gonna unpack that a bit more but just to stay with her because i feel like she probably could use a little bit more intention um tell us more about her what does she do and also she was originally his

stepmother yeah yeah pretty much yeah can we hear more about the family of gods it's a weird system isn't it so this was the world in which um deities were networked into households um to be a solitary deity was to be completely i mean it was a peculiar thing deities were like people we don't do

well when we're on our own and we live in families and households and sort of communities and the same was true across the ancient world of deities and so yeah it looks like originally i mean there's a fantastic poem at the end of the book of deuteronomy in which we kind of get a little glimpse into into

yahweh's backstory into god's backstory and there it just it describes and it uses a term called elion the most high which is an epithet of the god ale um who was the high god across this region the head of the pantheon um and it talks about ale dividing up the peoples or the nations according to the numbers

of the sons of god or the divine sons and yahweh is included among one of these divine sons of ale and you know yahweh is a portion the people of jacob so in other words the israelites um so we can see how even in this kind of fossilized poem in in the book of deuteronomy you've still got

this kind of a glimpse of a myth in which originally yahweh was not the highest god ale was the high god gradually yahweh historically seems to have eclipsed his his father if you like overthrown his father and take on his roles and functions um but we also get in another poem in the book of genesis where you

have this beautiful um series of um it's almost like an incantation a ritual incantation a series of blessings where different divinised and divine beings are called on to bless certain individuals and and there you get a reference to the goddess known as breasts and womb and most scholars again think this is probably a reference to this high

mother goddess asher because that was her role she was the mother of this of all of these divine children she and her consort were the divine parents of all the of the front line deities the ones that did all the kind of the main work and you know wars and and sort of pestilence and music and all

that other stuff that that you know frontline deities need to do um but yeah it's an extraordinary kind of glimpse into the world before the editing of a lot of these texts and the reshaping lot of these texts into a more monotheistic kind of form but also the very fact that these little poetic

fragments that show this

Polytheistic kind of backstory if you like were so important that they couldn't just be kind of excised out of these traditions they couldn't just be kind of cussed and got rid of these they were too important and so they stayed in the bible and which is you know and i'm glad that they did because they're beautiful

Poems apart from anything else yeah absolutely and i know that there are a lot of people who do love to hear about ashrae they want to hear about goddesses even if they come from religious traditions in which that's sort of not a part of their belief system um because monotheism and certainly we can come back to monotheism

and how the sort of encounter with roman philosophy ends up sort of perhaps erasing some of these traditions from various forms of religious practice but i guess what i would like to ask first is when you were talking about deities procreating and producing other deities you say i think it might be the last line in your

book that we made god in our image um when gods procreate are we looking at does ashrae have a womb does it take nine months to produce a baby deity do they grow up um is was there an infancy was yahweh a child at some point certainly we have stories about the childhood of jesus that aren't even

in the bible what do we know about his teen years um yeah exactly i mean that's the thing isn't it i mean that was one of the things you know so when you ask me know what what bits are missing i mean in terms of of his life story those bits are missing we don't get a sense

that yahweh of yahweh is a baby if you like and we do get him as a father i mean he there's a lot of fathering and mothering image in the bible that's applied to him um but generally speaking in the broadest ancient southwest asian culture um the gods did everything better than humans so whereas it would take

nine months for humans to gestate and birth a baby it takes nine days for a god to do it then again when gods have sex um they have sex with like seven days and seven nights without stopping um which might this does sound like a better balance generally it's the right way i know yeah but yeah so

they do everything better um but we do get we you do i mean in mesopotamian text you do um hear marduk who is the great god of babylon and there are a few texts that talk to him about when he was born he was already born with these you know amazing mantles or kind of um auras of

of radiance of divinity on him um but equally you know they say he was so amazing that he was born with you know four eyes um so there's that you do get the sense you get hints that across

the broader cultural landscape there is a sense that gods could be born but you don't get much of a

sense particularly not um [Music] yeah you don't get much of a sense i'm not really thought about not don't get much sense of them growing up as such in early very early myths you do so a lot of sumerian myths you get the sense that that gods can grow up and age goddesses particularly um some of them

don't tend to stay they they start off as young and newborn and then unfortunately tend to get raped by another god and then all of a sudden they're old and um cynical yeah i mean i think i think what we're sort of talking about really is change yeah and i think you know there's obviously we don't

really talk about the body of god anymore um and i wonder if at least one of the reasons for that is that we're deeply uncomfortable with change both in our own bodies um and our own human frailties but also in god right people do get upset that god changes his mind um that's something that people consider to

be a problem about the god of the hebrew bible and i'm wondering if one reason we don't talk about these things is because it's really our own discomfort with ourselves that leads us to be uncomfortable with god having a body is there any truth to that i think you're absolutely right i mean you know in some ways

it's almost it's almost what the christian story turns on though isn't it it's about a discomfort with the frailty and the the materiality of the human body the very fact that it it decays and it will die um and it will disappear and it's that sense that i think people found that very difficult particularly with the you

know as a particular kind of platonic philosophy took hold and that started to change ideas about the divine can't be changeable the divine can't be material the divine has to be completely other to everything else that's in the that's in the human world in the in the universe and so because the universe is material and decays and

changes and then that means that god has to be completely other from that so god cannot be material cannot change cannot decay and so that's where those ideas come from but in a way christianity kind of is almost continues to compensate for that in some ways by rendering this kind of the only correct body of god as

being the the body of jesus um who does you know who does is damaged and and who believes and who dies um and then obviously resurrects again and kind of to to make it somehow um possible for humans to also overcome decay and death at least yeah it's funny because reading your book gave me a new

testament scholar like a completely different perspective on passages about the body of jesus so jesus weeping is the shortest verse in the bible yeah gospel of john and that always seemed like this distinctly new testament human jesus thing until reading your book i realized that all of these things that i associated with jesus actually could have been

hereditary um because the god of the hebrew bible does them too and i know that your book is about god's body and is focused on the hebrew bible but i do think that one of the things that i'm not even sure if you meant to do this um but one of the things that your book does is

it really causes people who have a greater interest in in the new testament for religious reasons to rethink those passages and i think it really adds a lot to um the story of christianity as well um and i was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the process the historical processes and the ideas that

mean that we no longer talk about the body of god you kind of gesture to platonic philosophy you reference jesus but why don't we talk about this anymore and have we lost something by denying the sort of body of the god of the hebrew bible i mean i think that's thing there all sorts of different reasons i

mean cultural moments in the life of god if you like um that led to him gradually being disembodied and in the book i talk about it as like i start the book with a with a quotation from alice in wonderland the one about the cheshire cat and who's disappears from the tip of his tail slowly so so

disappears into all that's left is his grin and and in a way it's a similar thing with god is that all you're left with is is god's breath that's the only bit of his bodily form that that's left and is demonized and becomes the spirit you know the holy spirit or and the holy ghost as some people

call it um so there are various cultural moments that come that happen before the rise of the jesus movement and that that start to disembody god one of them is the destruction of the jerusalem temple and one of them is the ban on the use of images in worship that you know you cannot use images to worship

your god you know the second commandment which was put into place relatively late in the history of the ten commandments um and reflects the fact that people were using cult statues of god in their worship but it's also um once the hebrew texts are translated into greek so around about the third to the second centuries bce um

you start to get it becomes much easier to not just to translate from language to language but to translate and project cultural ideas from one place to another from one thought system to another and that's what begins to happen once the text is circulating in greek and most people were reading these texts not in hebrew but in

greek outside of of roman palestine and once that starts to happen so you start to get a re-reading you know every translation is an interpretation and you start to get a rereading of these very traditional hebrew passages that were reflecting good old-fashioned southern levantine mythology suddenly they start to become cutting-edge jewish metaphysics very much influenced by

the rise of certain not just platonic ideas a lot of aristotle ideas and various other stoic philosophies too but a gradual shift away from the notion that the divine could be material and this increasing emphasis on the immateriality in corporeality of the divine full stop however you imagine the divine to be and gradually those ideas came to

dominate they didn't it took centuries and centuries of christian thoughts and argument and fighting and killing to get to this point but gradually that became the dominant view within christianity that god couldn't possibly have a body because the only way he possibly could have a body was in the person of jesus christ and that's the only way

that god could have a body and it was about that exclusivity of bodily of divine corporeality in the person jesus that was so important it couldn't have had any other kind of form before it was in judaism in mainstream judaism it was slower and so a process the rabbis um the early rabbis you know from up until

the sixth century and and and beyond that were very much more comfortable with the idea of god still having a body they would talk about god you know um finding you know wearing a prayer shawl um and and binding to feeling on his arm and praying like that i mean they were much more comfortable with the idea

and you know islamics and with the emergence of islamic philosophies too that greatly engaged with and shaped a lot of christian and jewish theology too i mean you start to get this idea about absolutely the incorporeality immateriality of the divine um so it was a slow death of his body it was a slow disembodiment um but yeah

it's a kind of a shame you ask me you know what do we what have we lost and i think we've lost you know it's very hard to have a social relationship with an abstract which is what god ultimately becomes um and the reason why bodies are so important to humans is because that that is how that

is how we are i mean we are our bodies we're not different from our bodies we're not we don't inhabit bodies we are our bodies and it's by means of our bodies that we socialize with one another which is why it's so much easier to have a relationship with an otherworldly or dare i say imaginary being and

who you imagine to have some kind of bodily form than it is to have a relationship with an

abstract and which is why we still hang on to this language today even christians and jewish people who say that god doesn't have a body you can't quite let go of talking about what god sees and he hears um

you know that he he talks you know we still use this bodily language today and it's not just poetry it's a hangover it's a relic if you like from much much older ideas and traditions in which god really did hear because he had ears and he really did see because he had eyes yeah i think picking up

on that idea of sociality and going to some of the questions in the chat um a lot of people are interested in that so so take things in order um joe said wonderful talk is there much or any information on how yahweh worked his way to the top of the hierarchy of gods such a good question and

the the short answer is it's really frustrating because we don't quite know how it happened and it's one of those things that we just can't i mean what's so interesting about ancient israel and judah is that we have very few texts from these particularly these iron age kingdoms you know we have a few inscriptions i mean maybe

it's because they were mostly writing on scrolls which you know tend to disappear in an archaeological record rather than writing on stone monuments um but we don't really know how it happened all we know is that it looks probably by about you know by about the 10th century say maybe slightly before that the end of the

very end of the late bronze age and that sort of shift seems to have started um but yeah we don't we don't know how it happened and i wish we did but we just don't have enough solid evidence the biblical let texts are too late and we don't have any other comparative evidence to talk about yahweh because

nobody he was a minor deity nobody else was really interested in him yeah and sort of picking up on that kind of unknown question one of the um questions asked about the theme in sort of mesopotamian literature of gods committing patricide yeah what other elements um are being kind of borrowed from mythologies kind of other sort of

elements like that and you know did yahweh potentially kill i is he like buried next to moses somewhere an unmarked grave and do you know it's possible because yeah absolutely the patch side theme is really really common and we find it in his type mythology obviously greek mythology we find it in um certain babylonian um well primarily

um acadian and then some sumerian texts too so you do get the eye and day aside as common in these myths as well so i think it's possible um there could have been a myth in which yahweh overthrew his father i mean some people say there's a fantastic um motif that you find repeated it's in isaiah

and you also find it in ezekiel which talks about what looks to be a divine or semi-divine tyrant who strides up the cosmic mountain to overthrow he says i'm going to put myself in this on the throne of ale on the top of the holy mountain i'm going to make myself god and god says no you're not

and he throws him down into number he says you're not you're no longer god you are immortal and i wonder if that does contain just a little bit of a hint of a myth in which it was originally yahweh who was striding up the holy mountain to sit on the throne of ale possibly yeah that that's

that's really interesting um one of our um questioners wants to ask about the more positive side of um father-son relationships uh between divine beings because obviously in christianity um got sort of defined as god the father now that's the element of his like complex familial relationships that have sort of persisted in christianity and is this true of

yahweh as well in the sense of him being a father yeah um in a that yeah there are some remarkable texts unless people say to me that's not in the bible i said well here it is you know look at look at the footnotes in the book like they'll give you the text reference and they go oh

yeah it is in the bible so he has we see this beautiful image of him in the book of deuteronomy in another poem in which it's talking about god being the father of his people which is a very common kind of language to to use um but it's about the baby jacob um who seems to be standing

in for the whole people of israel but he's not called jacob he's called gesturing which is interesting in itself it's a name packed with kind of mythological nuances um but god nurses this child in the wilderness and there's this amazing scene where in the poem where it talks about um he looked at him you know gesture and

this baby boy was the apple of his eye that's the way that the english translators had generally conventionally rendered one hebrew idiom with an english idiom so it means you know to be absolutely the center of you know somebody's world also somebody's love and gaze but the hebrew idiom that the the phrase apple of his eye is

replacing um is literally the little man in the eye and it refers to the little reflection that you can see of yourself when you look really close into somebody's eyes so just that image of of yahweh cradling this baby boy and looking so deeply into his eyes that he's he can you can see your reflection in his

eye i think it's beautiful and it's a very tender portrait of a of a fatherly you know what we would understand to be a proper fatherly love the kind of father that he loved that we would we would hope for ourselves um so yeah i like that he also has a daughter a breath-borne daughter this

goddess wisdom

who comes from his mouth um very similar to the way that certain greek and certain egyptian deities are born um and she seems to be um you know she's his little child and she's with him at the creation of the world and is helping him it's almost like he's kind of this architect he's building the cosmos and

she's almost like they're holding us like talking and measuring things out with him um but yeah she she quickly you know she becomes this kind of she's this divine wisdom figure and perhaps it's just personification but it's a female personification and it's a very kind of father daughter relationship between them which i which i particularly like as

well yeah i mean that's much more intimate than just the sort of rather blind language of god the father doesn't bring out the intimacy yeah of that scene it's sort of worth putting that body back in there for christian theology too um to go to our next question which is quite specific but you kind of painted this

portrait at this sort of southwestern mesopotamian deity who as he immigrates or is sort of trafficked to sort of the mediterranean and the sort of greco-roman world is sort of the distinctiveness of him and his body is sort of erased in the cheshire cat image that you had um father jerrell robinson brown asks would you say there's

any connection between what happens to god's body in the hebrew scriptures and the sort of you know he put it in quotation marks so-called heresy of dositism you know by which you know jesus only sort of seems to be a human being yeah i think it's really interesting all those early christian debates and you know and they

were christian i mean just because they were later condemned as you know heretics and you know they were they were as christian as in as anybody else if the word even if the label christian is appropriate at that time which i'm not always kind of sure it is but yeah um all sorts of debates going on up

into the fourth century about you know was jesus's body just a phantasm was it a fake body was this a body that god put on um to pretend to be human and and it was had huge amplifications i mean the debates i mean as you know comes with the debates that i had about you know what was

was jesus really god was he really mad because if he said he wasn't really human then that meant he couldn't have suffered and couldn't have died which makes a mockery of the notion that his resurrection somehow was a proper resurrection and obviously makes a mockery of them therefore what his resurrection means for for believers um but if

you say see he had to be properly a man but then how can uh how you know what does that

mean does that mean that this was god as a man does this doesn't mean that did he really eat did he really drink did he really defecate and these debates were hugely important because as i said it

it really got to the heart of this the nature of christ was he properly human or was he properly god could he be one could it be both could it be neither um and the same debates are going on about moses as well actually in jewish tradition like you know when moses went up in mount sinai and

he was there for 40 days and 40 nights or did he defecate when he was up there because that's holy space and as we've talked about before you can't pollute holy space um so they were really important questions so i do think that in some of those theological debates among some of the um not just the church

fathers but a lot of these other important theologians in the first four centuries you do get pointed to certain sorts of passages and certain illusions are made to hebrew bible passages where um the bodiliness of of god um and particularly you know pastors like the contest on of elijah's contest with the prophets of baal on mount carmel

where elijah basically um says the prophets of baal you know your god's not listening to you maybe he's maybe he's gone to the bathroom that's why you know he's too busy like you know straining at stool to be able to answer your prayers and so those sorts of texts were brought into play in debating about the nature

of god um so i don't think it's necessarily a i mean it's an interesting it's some people had a problem with the you know origin himself was you know talked about these stupid christians who thought that god had a body so big that his head reached into the heavens and his feet stretched down to earth i mean

but for other christians you know we've got some early gospels and similar early lives of jesus that talk about jesus himself having a body that was exactly like that so these were common these ideas had a lot of cultural currency and this currency remained live and potent and valuable for many centuries um beyond the lives of the

hebrew bible texts themselves yeah and i think that i it could sound to people that even having this conversation is somehow anti-religious you know or irreverent but i think what your book shows is it's not just the sort of emotional payoff of looking at the body of god and in terms of how one would relate to it

and think about one's own position in the world but also this is a real intellectual conversation it's a real debate and these are debates that people had both in rabbinic texts and in early christianity with reference to precisely these passages and these questions you know we're not the first people to ask about excrement and whether or not

god or jesus ever went to the bathroom that was a very serious debate involving bishops and priests um and this is not just sort of sort of provocate provocation or something like that just trying to be sort of um clever and cute um it's a real theological conversation it has real intellectual value for how we look at

uh the hebrew bible the new testament sort of philosophical dilemmas and all kinds of things um we're nearly out of time but as it's friday it seems like we should certainly end with genitals and um angela asks was yahweh circumcised and can you comment on the narrative in which god tries to kill moses and zipporah because of

the circumcision yeah so so that so firstly was god circumcised well the rabbis certainly thought he was um they have a big debate about um worrying about circumcision and worrying mainly about whether noah and adam were circumcised so in genesis we're told that abraham you know god says to abraham right i want you to circumcise yourself um

and this is what's going to make you tameim which basically means unblemished whole and it sort of perfects the body in some ways and that means that you can walk with me and he you know he literally walks with him but also means to kind of be bonded together in this covenant relationship and so the rabbi is

worried because noah was was equally described as whole unblemished and yet he wasn't said to be circumcised so where what you know did god forget to tell noah that he needed to be circumcised why did he you know and then what about adam you know god created adam and you know was adam created circumcised or not and

the rabbis were really concerned about this and but they ended up agreeing and i think quite sensibly they said well you know we know that um you know we know that noah must have been must have been circumcised because he's called hameen but an adam must have been made made you know created circumcised because it says in

the text and god created man in his own image and we know that adam must have been created circumcised because god is circumcised too so they just assumed that that circumcision is something that that god experiences and and yeah he was circumcised and that text next us about moses and zipper um the text is very confusing

because it just uses primarily male pronouns so we don't know what's happening who is doing what to whom exactly but we're told that moses and zipper his wife and their little boy are going along the road at night which is always a bad sign in a lot of biblical stories and then yahweh he yahweh encounters them and

yahweh tried to kill him no sorry and he tried to kill him and we don't know whether it's yahweh trying to kill moses yahweh trying to kill moses son or moses trying to kill his son but whatever

happens somebody is trying to kill somebody else and the only way that this is averted is when zipper circumcises her

son and doubts the bloody foreskin on somebody's genitalia either moses or his son we don't know and then she says you are a bridegroom of blood to me a bridegroom of blood by circumcision now all that language is playing on the word for bridegroom is very similar to words that are associated with circumcision in related languages so

it looks like is this some kind of prenuptial fertility ritual of circumcision that's kind of been given as new location within this particular narrative or story well we don't know but yeah certainly circumcision stops god killing it seems um [Music] which is interesting because baby boys are circumcised on the eighth day which is normally when you would

give to god the sacrifice to god the firstborn of your lambs and your flocks and your herds and so yes some people have argued that a circumcision an apocrypha it protects you from harm who knows um but yeah god is circumcised wow on that note and in knowledge that like god really would like me to get a

massage this weekend that is what god would do um i cannot help it like thank you for this really rich and rewarding conversation but also for the book that is so thought provoking i thought maybe as a bible scholar that i wouldn't you know learn so much from this book but it is so beautifully written um so

relevant sort of modern conversations about theology and about how we think about ourselves and just an incredible balance of sort of accessible rating but just rich information thank you so much oh thank you and thank you so much for a brilliant conversation i really enjoyed it thank you thank you both this talk was so cool i learned

so much i'm like as soon as it stops snowing i'm gonna run to the bookstore and get my copy so i can read it i have so many questions and i wish we could go on forever but unfortunately we are out of time um thank you francesca thank you candida for having this conversation giving your friday night

and thank you to everyone who is tuning in and watching and showing up for authors publishers indie book selling and the incredible staff at harvard bookstore thank you again for tuning in if you would like to support francesca and purchase the book there is links in the chat if you would like to purchase god in anatomy thank

you again everyone uh have a great rest of your night stay warm take care