

with Samuel demonstrates the category's gradience; YHWH was a prototypical example of deity, while the postmortem Samuel occupied the fuzzy boundaries.

The other feature that occurs repeatedly in rhetoric about classification as deity is immortality. Perhaps the most explicit identification of this feature as constitutive of deity is found in Ps 82:6 (see above), but the contrasting of the divinity of YHWH and the humanity of the Egyptians in Isa 31:3 also appeals to that immortality—or at least relative invulnerability—as representative of deity status. (Death could be experienced by deities, but as with some humans, it was not always permanent.) Ezekiel 28:9 similarly contrasts mortality against deity status, rhetorically asking the ruler of Tyre, “Are you really going to say, ‘I am a deity’ [’*ēlōhîm* ’*ānî*] to the ones who are killing you?” The steps taken by the deity in Gen 3:22–24 to ensure that the humans could not eat the fruit of the tree of life and live forever reflect the rhetorical leveraging of immortality as an additional constitutive feature of deity.⁷³ They were already *kē’lōhîm*, “as deity,” in one sense, and had they eaten the fruit and become immortal they would have arrogated the second of the two main features of deity. The deity prevented that, so humanity remained *like* deity, but still lacking a prototypical feature. One of the primary struggles for the deity within the Primeval History appears to be protecting the integrity of the porous boundaries that separated deity and humanity (Garr 2003, 59–61).

Patronage was another prototypical feature of deity, but rather than being aimed at determining if an entity possessed a faculty that was diagnostic of deity, the rhetoric associated with patronage in the Hebrew Bible seems to have been more directly concerned with demonstrating which deity was the true patron over the people, and therefore the rightful object of worship and fidelity. In this context, the term “deity” primarily designated a relational status.⁷⁴ The one who had sovereignty over a region or people was authoritative over that region or people—they were *the* deity.⁷⁵ We see this rhetoric most clearly in the story of

⁷³ The salience of immortality to the concept of deity is reflected in many non-biblical texts. As just a single example, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which the protagonist—already part deity—seeks to achieve immortality, Gilgamesh laments, “When the gods created mankind, / Death for mankind they set aside, / Life in their own hands retaining” (Epic of Gilgamesh 10.3.3–5 [Speiser 1969]).

⁷⁴ It is this sense that is frequently used in contemporary rhetoric about prioritizing commitment to certain entities or ideologies. People do not accuse others of making alcohol or nationalism or some other vice their “god” to indicate they think alcohol or nationalism has full access to strategic information or is immortal. Those accusations reflect the perception of dogmatic and unwavering commitment. As a non-pejorative example, a friend in 1998 commented that if Dave Matthews and Jewel had a baby, it would be his new god.

⁷⁵ This is not monotheism; it’s just a question of whose authority takes priority and who is owed allegiance. Rhetoric associated with this patronage and with incomparability, however, would facilitate the development of concepts of divine exclusivity that would