

4.

YHWH in the Hebrew Bible

In the previous chapter, I proposed that the semantic base of deity is unseen agency, and I identified several conceptual domains commonly activated in the Hebrew Bible's representations of the generic concept of deity. I also identified a number of additional profiles and discussed the category's negotiable boundaries and some of the associated prototype effects. The focus in that chapter was primarily on the generic concept of deity and on deities other than YHWH, although there was some discussion of the relationship of these conceptual frameworks to YHWH, given how salient the latter was to the concept of deity within the social worlds that produced the biblical texts. In this chapter I revisit those same conceptual domains and profiles, but with a focus on the way they were deployed to represent YHWH.

Before turning to those conceptual structures, however, I'd like to address a significant difference between the representation of YHWH and of generic deity in the Hebrew Bible. The domains and profiles discussed to this point have been focused on the wider social functions of deity, but deity was also significant as a source of individual and private blessing, comfort, and protection. This domain of DEITY is central to the patriarchal narratives and is represented in many places in the Hebrew Bible in reference to YHWH. Apart from the later wisdom and lament literature, which expands the exploration of individualism (Niditch 2015), even that representation as a deity for the people is embedded in narratives or rhetorical arcs that ultimately serve broader social and institutional interests. Because of the nature of the biblical literature, private and individual relationships are largely omitted from discourse regarding deities other than YHWH. Perhaps the closest we come to exceptions are the discussions in Gen 31 of Nahor's family deity and private collection of teraphim, and in Judg 17–18 of Micah's private shrine and priest. Both, however, are commonly subsumed under a Yahwistic rubric.

Genesis 31:53 mentions "the deity of Nahor" (*'ēlōhē nāhōr*) parallel to "the deity of Abraham" (*'ēlōhē 'abrāhām*). This seems to refer to Nahor's otherwise unattested personal or family deity (van der Toorn 1999b). The text refers appositionally to the two deities as the "deities of their father" (*'ēlōhē 'ābihem*), and some translations conflate the two by rendering "the God of their father"