

prototype theory—that would undergird the approach of the rest of the book. In addition to contributing to a better understanding of the role of intuitive cognition in the structuring of our knowledge regarding ourselves and the world around us, the frameworks also demonstrate the necessity of weighing the features of intuitive cognition against any reflective account of deity, divine images, and divine agency, whether emic or etic. No such account (my own included) operates in a social or rhetorical vacuum, and when we set out to draw hard boundary lines around the relevant concepts, we run the risk of distorting them, particularly because our approaches are so frequently influenced by concerns for structuring values and power—concerns to which none of us is by any means immune. There is often a lot at stake in both academic and devotional approaches, which is one of the reasons the hard and fast lines of dictionary semantics and contemporary philosophical frameworks have persevered for so long despite their distortions and their methodological shortcomings. If nothing else, bringing intuitive cognition to the surface of this discussion should equip and incentivize scholars to better identify and confront the frameworks that we presume, create, deploy, and defend to serve our own interests.²

The first chapter constructed a theoretical framework for deity based on the insights of the cognitive science of religion, and particularly the supernatural agency hypothesis. I argued that deity concepts (1) are sparked by humanity's hypersensitivity to unseen agency in the world around us, (2) further develop through reflective elaborations on intuitive reasoning about the agency of the partible and permeable person, (3) proliferate within large and complex societies as deities perform prosocial functions that increase social cohesion, and (4) are most effective as prosocial agents when they are backed by powerful social institutions and can be reified and presenced through some form of material media. Reconstructing deity concepts from their roots in agency detection and personhood is intended to sidestep many of the contemporary philosophical and academic frameworks regarding ontology, identity, and deity that have for so long complicated the academic study of deity in the Bible. To illustrate how this framework can help challenge such tendentiousness outside the study of the Hebrew Bible, I apply it in the appendix to a very brief interrogation of the study of early christology.³

² Paula Fredriksen (2006) published a wonderful article entitled “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time Has Come to Go,” and one of the ideas she discussed that is still central to the study of the Hebrew Bible is “monotheism” (see also Fredriksen 2022). I would suggest we carefully interrogate this and other ideas and frameworks common to the historical-critical study of the Hebrew Bible—such as religion—that may need to be reapplied or that may offer little to no analytical value beyond that structuring of values and power.

³ Multiple scholars working on the conceptualization of deity in the Christian scriptures have recognized a philosophical tendentiousness. Brittany Wilson (2021, 11) comments,