

rhetoric of the many psalms that express the joy of and yearning for seeing the deity's face.) The theophanies of the early biblical narratives are reflective elaborations intended to serve specific rhetorical goals, but they do not fundamentally undermine the observation that deity concepts build on the conceptual base of unseen agency. For those consuming the texts and doing the conceptualizing, the deity—apart from their presencing media—remained unseen.

Despite the prescription in Exod 34:23 and Deut 16:16 to see the face of the deity three times a year,<sup>3</sup> there was still a tension inherent in the deity's cultic visibility.<sup>4</sup> The use of non-anthropomorphic imagery could potentially have been rationalized as a prophylactic practice meant to shield the common viewer from the deity's anthropomorphic form (Ornan 2005). It would have served the interests of those in positions of authority over the cult to limit the perception of access to the deity. Indeed, concerns about the degree to which a cultic object facilitated that access may sit at the root of preexilic attempts to reflectively compartmentalize the loci of the deity's self and agency (see the next chapter). Asserting the deadly nature of the deity's face would address this (Exod 33:20), as would confining the deity's location to the heavens (Deut 4:36). Restricting entry to the inner sanctuary to a single individual on a single day was one of many ways biblical authors and cultic authorities protected the privacy of the divine presence, and even for that single individual, there is a text that insists incense was required so that a cloud of smoke obscured the ark from view (Lev 16:13). Narratives suggesting a fundamentally anthropomorphic nature for the deity—a deity that walks, talks, smells, and gets angry (Stavrakopoulou 2021)—also would have contributed to the perception that the cultic object (which did not do those things) afforded only partial access to the divine presence. So, while Israel and

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<sup>3</sup> The verbal root *r'h* in these passages is vocalized in MT as the passive niph'al stem (i.e., "appear before my face"), but the consonantal text was likely originally understood in the active qal stem (i.e., "see my face"). This is most directly indicated by the allusion to the requirement in Isa 1:12, which has the root in the infinitive construct—*lērā'ôt*—and is vocalized as a niph'al in MT, but it lacks the preformative *he* required by the niph'al stem (we would expect *lāhērā'ôt*). There is also no preposition in Isaiah to support interpreting it as "appear *before* my face." (The articulations of the commandment in Exodus and Deuteronomy only have the direct object marker *'et*.)

<sup>4</sup> Note Ornan's (2005, 173) observations regarding cult images in Mesopotamia: "Most men or women, therefore, rarely saw the anthropomorphic images of their deities in ninth–sixth-century Assyria and Babylonia. In their daily lives, Babylonians and Assyrians were not surrounded by figures of their prominent gods, but instead by clay statuettes of minor deities, by composite apotropaic creatures and by divine symbols engraved on seals. The ancients saw their prominent human-shaped gods on special occasions, such as cultic processions, but as a rule, cult statues in Mesopotamia were kept closed in shrines and temples, into which ordinary people could not have entered."