

### 3.

## Deity in the Hebrew Bible

This chapter will interrogate the generic category of deity as preserved in the texts of the Hebrew Bible and in related inscriptions. This chapter will focus on the conceptual structures of generic deity, and the next chapter will move on to a parallel interrogation of YHWH as an instantiation of that generic concept (cf. Cornell 2020). Some additional methodological care is necessary in this chapter. Synthesizing the presentation of deity across all the texts of the Hebrew Bible will result in a largely artificial profile of deity that would never have been espoused by any single person living in the societies responsible for the relevant texts. The texts also privilege a small number of elite perspectives that are engaging with their community's past and with their own situational exigencies. There is, in addition, an unknown tangle of other diachronic (that is, occurring through time) and synchronic (that is, occurring at one time) influences.<sup>1</sup> Data are not available that allow us to fully unravel that tangle and entirely discount those perspectives, but with the aid of the theoretical framework developed in chapter 1 and some principles from cognitive linguistics, we can more carefully parse the data that are available and make progress bridging the gap between the texts and the lived experiences that contributed to their composition. This will get us a few significant steps closer to understanding ancient Southwest Asian conceptualizations of deity.

In doing that parsing in this chapter, I make two broad assumptions. First, I assume that elite perspectives about the nature and function of deity were not entirely decoupled from more widespread and less elite perspectives. There were important differences, to be sure, but the gravitational pull of intuitive reasoning

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<sup>1</sup> We also have no living informants to interview, so there will be significant gaps in my ability to reproduce a representative sample of the entire spectrum of lived experiences that would have been brought to bear on the generation of meaning from the texts of the Hebrew Bible. As an example, the texts of the Bible are textual artifacts, which were not the primary media for communicating or thinking about deity anciently. It privileges the modern prioritization of text to ground the interrogation primarily in the written word, and particularly when the relationship to that written word was so distinct for ancient Israelites and Judahites, few of whom could access it directly.