1.
What Is a Deity?

A question that is central to my thesis is one that Vitor Hurowitz once scribbled into the margins of an early draft of Mark Smith's (1990, 6–8) book *The Early History of God*: "What is an *ilu* [deity]?"[1] This chapter will set the stage for answering that question, but instead of proposing a provisional definition, or plowing ahead as if we already all agree regarding what constituted a deity in ancient Southwest Asia,[2] this chapter will aim for a more methodologically sound and heuristically robust theoretical framework for the origins and functions of deity concepts. This will inform the next three chapters' interrogations of ancient Israel's and Judah's presencing media and authoritative literature. Rather than begin this interrogation with textual data, I begin with what cognitive scientists of religion have suggested is the conceptual taproot of deity: agency. Those scholars have done a lot of the heavy lifting already with their development of the so-called supernatural agency hypothesis, and the first section of this chapter will outline the most promising features of that hypothesis.[3] The bulk of the chapter will then be dedicated to interrogating personhood and its relationship to agency. The focus will ultimately be trained on deceased persons and the blurred lines that separate deceased persons from deities, and particularly in ancient Southwest Asia and the Hebrew Bible. The final section will address theories regarding the relationship of socially concerned deities to large and complex societies.

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[1] A wonderful contribution to this discussion within Assyriology is Porter 2009.

[2] Note Stanley Stowers's (2021, 387) comments regarding the subtext that tends to govern the scholarly responses to this question: "This subtext includes the doctrine that the late Hebrew Bible and Judaism eventually became monotheistic. A narrative about evolution from cruder conceptions of God to (a higher and more spiritual) monotheism frames the discussions either explicitly or implicitly."

[3] Many scholars recognize the problems with the loaded term supernatural, and many have shifted to preference for the framework of counterintuitiveness. I think there is value to this framework, but it seems to me there is still too much that remains to be worked out for me to incorporate it into my own theoretical model here. For discussion, see Purzycki and Willard 2016.