

## CONCLUSION

What this chapter has argued is that concepts of deity originate in intuitions about unseen agency in the world around us. These agents could be discussed within social groups, represented in material media, utilized by social institutions, deployed to explain unknown phenomena, and assigned features, biographies, and character traits. At some point along the way, social institutions would begin to link ritual acts with interactions with these agents. The ability of such agents to covertly monitor others, to provide special access to strategic information, and to punish would have provided the institutions with leverage over a host of prosocial forces. The increased use of material media to presence the deities, and ritual to curate the relationship of individuals to such agents, would have also increased the perception that those agents were present and monitoring behavior. This would increase discourse within the society regarding those agents, further embedding them in the prior expectations of individuals, causing them to more frequently appeal to them as explanations for unknown and unexplained events. It's probably at this point that these agents could be called "deities" according to the most representative use of the term in English today, but there is no analytically useful way to draw to a firm line of distinction between what is and what is not a deity in an ancient society. If it is important to have a boundary, we must hope to identify those drawn by the society itself, though even those boundaries will usually be fuzzy and debated, as entangled as they will so often be with the situational structuring of values and power by people and institutions, particularly within large and complex societies.

Because deities are not unique categories that occur in nature, there is no acid into which we can dip a text to see if deity is present. They are constructed and curated by individual cognition, by cultural evolution, and by social institutions, which means the most direct answer to the question posed by the title of this chapter is rather simple, if a bit disappointing: a deity is whatever a group says is a deity. In the next chapter I will apply the theoretical framework developed above to the material remains of first millennium BCE Israel and Judah in order to see what insights that framework can generate regarding the use of material media to presence divine agency. Following that, the third and fourth chapters will apply the resulting framework first to the generic concept of deity in the Hebrew Bible, and then to the representation of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible. This will demonstrate YHWH's foundation upon the fundamental frameworks of generic deity and its material presencing.